

Understanding Students' Learner Autonomy  
in the Department of English in Two Algerian  
Universities

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# Understanding Students' Learner Autonomy in the Department of English in Two Algerian Universities

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**LA** Learner autonomy

**SLL** Second Language Learning

**SRL** Self-Regulated Learning

**EFL** English as a Foreign Language

**EMI** English as a Medium of Instruction

**CALL** Computer-Assisted Language Learning

**EAP** English for Academic Purposes

**ESP** English for Specific Purposes

**SDT** Self-Determination Theory

### **Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this work and any materials which do not belong to me has been identified. The results and the conclusions have not been used for any award except this.

## **Dedication**

To my mother, "*Fatima*"

You are my first and biggest Love

To my father, "*Adda*"

You have given me everything, I will forever be indebted to you

To my sister, "*Hisaa*"

You are the joy of our family thank you for putting a smile on our faces every day.

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## Abstract

The last five years have witnessed a growing interest in learner autonomy research in Algeria, especially in the department of English at the tertiary level. In this context, students are described as lacking autonomy, often for not meeting the narrative about this concept as prescribed in the literature. In that regard, the current research challenges those claims and favours the idea that learner autonomy "is an essential characteristic of all successful learners and can be found everywhere if we know how to look" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 18). Therefore, different existing varieties of learner autonomy manifest in different degrees and in different ways that reflect the contexts in which the concept is employed. Following that line of thought, this study responds to calls for contextual investigations of learner autonomy that incite to take into account the specific educational and overall socio-cultural contexts where the concept is enacted (Little, 1999a; O'Leary, 2014; Wang, 2016). To achieve this, a mixed-methods research design was employed. This involved administering questionnaires and conducting interviews with both students and teachers in the department of English at two Algerian universities.

The findings from this research showed that students and teachers initially demonstrated broad understandings of learner autonomy. Students framed learner autonomy as "the ability to learn by oneself", while their teachers explained it as the students' "ability to learn in detachment from teachers". Although these two understandings were expressed differently, they were based on two core values, namely "independence and responsibility in learning", which both students and teachers referred to when describing what learner autonomy meant to them. The findings from this research also showed that teachers' previous educational experiences shaped their current understandings of learner autonomy. As for students, their understandings of the concerned concept were influenced by a list of factors that were categorised as individual, socio-cultural, and socio-educational.

The participants in this research presented a multitude of contextual interpretations of the investigated concept. In that regard, students' responses resulted in a complex and detailed description of learner autonomy as a notion associated with learning situations in their personal lives, in English language learning, in learning academic subjects outside the classroom, and in classroom academic content learning. As for teachers, their interpretations

of learner autonomy were mainly relevant to the performance of students in their respective academic subjects. The finding also showed that the diverse contextual interpretations of learner autonomy that students and teachers gave were subject to the learning contexts, the learning/teaching roles that the participants assumed, and the learning objectives that they aimed to achieve. Moreover, the extent to which students exerted learner autonomy depended on a list of factors that were categorised as personal, academic, and external.

In the end, the research presents in-depth understandings and detailed contextual interpretations of learner autonomy that correspond to the context/s of Algerian students in the department of English. Such results echo the students' and teachers' voices about the concept of learner autonomy, which should help in understanding manifestations of this concept in similar settings and enriching the literature around this subject.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1. Research introduction and rationale

Ever since it has been introduced to educational discourse, learner autonomy is recognised as an important learning characteristic, an effective learning process, and a prominent learning goal (Little, 1991). Learner autonomy is a concept that has global recognition, and it has been researched in different educational contexts around the world. However, it has only gained currency in the context of Algeria after the implementation of the last educational system called LMD (Licence-Masters-Doctorate). This reform aimed to produce autonomous students after a long time of being underpinned by an educational system that was criticised for being passive and outdated.

Before presenting the rationale behind this research, it is important to understand what makes learner autonomy worthy of research, and what this notion provides to the individual and society in general. First, there is a substantial amount of research that supports the correlation between learner autonomy and effective learning. For instance, it is noted by Oates (2019) that “learners with superior self-regulatory skills tend to be more motivated academically and demonstrate effective learning ability” (p. 2). Therefore, learner autonomy entails desirable critical learning skills that enable students to assume ownership over their learning and help them become more responsible, motivated, and independent. Such skills became more necessary than ever in this modern time in which the labour market is highly competitive, and knowledge has never been more accessible and democratised. The influence of learner autonomy is also believed to transcend from educational to social contexts. In fact, Holec (1981) acknowledged that the ultimate aim of learner autonomy is to enable individuals to have a voice and participate in modern democratic life. In this situation, learner autonomy is not only about producing good learners but also about preparing thoughtful and civic-minded individuals with high morale and sense of obligation who are capable of contributing to their perceived ideal society (Little, 1999a).

Although the concept of autonomy springs from non-linguistic origins, it is heavily discussed in language learning domains. It was Holec (1981) who sparked the discussion about autonomy in language learning matters, which later gained much recognition from academics worldwide. Recently, Algerian academics have demonstrated a growing interest in learner

autonomy, particularly in research that is based on the faculty of foreign languages. Such research explored issues like the readiness for autonomous learning (Ghout-Khenoune, 2015; Hadi, 2018), the cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy (Missoum, 2016; Arib & Maouche, 2021; Lakehal, 2021), and interventions for autonomous learning (Senouci, 2019). In such research, the concept of learner autonomy is discussed within the formal academic context, in which very often Algerian students are described as lacking autonomy. Indeed, these studies provide some useful context-specific debates about autonomy in Algerian universities. However, they also seem to raise some red flags about adopting preconceived understandings of learner autonomy, which Algerian students in the department of English in these contexts may not relate to. In addition, these studies seem to have overlooked some contextual variables that are responsible for variations and complexity in students' and teachers' understandings of what learner autonomy means. In this regard, several scholars stressed the need for contextual investigations of learner autonomy. For instance, Wang (2016) mentioned that learner autonomy "...requires context-specific definitions and clarifications of the concept. This is particularly important when the idea is recognised as a key educational goal and widely promoted on a national basis." (p. 250). Also, O'Leary (2014) presents the same argument, saying that "the development of autonomy is both situated in terms of the institutional and cultural context, and dependent on learner goals as well as personality traits" (p. 17). In addition, Hurd (2005) noted that "autonomy can take a variety of different forms depending on learning context and learner characteristics" (p. 2). Suggestions about contextual investigations of learner autonomy encourage looking at the specific and overall contexts of learners. This would eventually help in understanding what learner autonomy means, how it is practised, and what should be done to promote it.

Having acknowledged the context-specific nature of the concept of learner autonomy, this research proposes counterarguments to claims about the inappropriateness of this concept in non-western countries, including Algeria. In that regard, this study recommends acknowledging the different varieties of learner autonomy and provides insights into the concept and its meanings, which manifest prolifically depending on the context in which they are enacted by educational parties (Smith et al., 2018). As a result, this research corresponds to Little (1999a), O'Leary (2014), and Wang (2016) views about the need to have an in-depth contextualised investigation of the notion of learner autonomy. This is done by examining the

meanings and practices associated with learner autonomy in a context where the concept is practised, and by taking into consideration all the personal, institutional, and socio-cultural variables before adopting any pedagogies to promote learner autonomy. In addition to this, my personal interest in the notion of learner autonomy presents another rationale for the conduct of this research. In the coming section, I shall present my personal motivation to research learner autonomy.

## **1.2. My interest in learner autonomy research**

I first came across the concept of learner autonomy at university, where one of my teachers, who later became my supervisor, suggested that I work on such a notion in my final year Licence degree project. Having read about the concept and the values it bears, I felt that I have always been autonomous in my academic and social life as well. My interest in learner autonomy grew more when I reviewed publications about students in the department of English at Algerian universities, which I personally could not relate to. In other words, I could not see myself making decisions in my formal education about my learning objectives, the content, and the evaluation process, as learner autonomy is often described. To me, the syllabus was meticulously designed by professional academics to prepare us for advanced stages of research. Therefore, I could not properly relate the literature about autonomy in language learning to the academic learning goals that concern the degree I pursued.

Both my licence and master's dissertations were about learner autonomy in the department of English at Algerian universities. However, I intentionally limited those works to learning English language skills beyond the classroom context. Back then, I did not have the background or the time to undertake a thorough investigation that could put forth my desire to investigate the reason behind my inability to connect the fundamental goals of my study course to the literature about learner autonomy. However, as soon as I had the opportunity to embark on a PhD journey, I decided that it was time for me to audaciously step forward and say that learner autonomy for students in the department of English may not mean the same thing as the literature about language learner autonomy. On that account, research about learner autonomy in the department of English at Algerian universities does not give contextual variables the importance they merit. In the end, indeed, my interest in learner autonomy research was ignited by personal experiences. However, it increased even more

after comprehending the potential theoretical and empirical impact of this study, as described in the coming section.

### **1.3. Research significance**

The study presents a genuine contribution to the broad area of learner autonomy research and to the academic context of Algerian universities. In its essence, the study mainly corresponds to calls for more contextualised research about learner autonomy (O'Leary, 2014; Wang, 2016), and it contributes to the literature about the concerned concept in under-explored contexts like Algeria. In addition, the study also involves two methodological contributions to the domain of learner autonomy: the first is that the research views learner autonomy as a holistic process that involves learning inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, both contexts are jointly considered. The second methodological contribution manifests in adopting a bottom-up approach, which suggests promoting learner autonomy as it already exists in its original contexts (Holliday, 2003; Smith, 2002). Following that line of thought, the study echoes the voices of Algerian students and teachers about what learner autonomy means and how it is enacted in their respective learning and teaching context/s. Such investigations can help spread awareness about the different understandings of learner autonomy as identified by students and teachers. As a result, the findings of this research can inform academics and stakeholders about the complexities of learner autonomy in the context of this research and beyond. Consequently, appropriate procedures and sensible decisions can be taken by policymakers to promote learner autonomy in ways that correspond to the students' educational goals and context. Finally, the findings of this research provide students with practical examples and recommendations that can potentially increase their autonomy in learning with respect to the conditioning contextual variables of their learning environment.

### **1.4. The research purpose and guiding questions**

Learner autonomy is a biased construct that its meaning is differently negotiated in various socio-cultural contexts (Willis, 2011; Chirkov, 2009). In other words, what this concept means and the extent to which one can be autonomous are relative to the context in which this notion is employed. Besides the social and cultural bias in recognising learner autonomy, other situational variables raise like learning goals, learning settings, learning materials etc, which should also be considered when researching learner autonomy. Following this line of

thought, the overall aim of this study is to understand what learner autonomy means to Algerian students and teachers within their relevant learning contexts, which imply variables that shape how this concept is understood and practised. To address this, the following guiding questions are proposed:

1. What do students and teachers understand by the concept of learner autonomy, and how do they interpret it in relevance to their learning/teaching context/s?
2. What characteristics and learning practices do students and teachers attribute to autonomous learners?
3. What factors influence students' autonomous learning practices, understandings, and interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy?

Thus far, and after laying forward the key introductory elements of this study, I shall shift to the context of this research, where details about the background context and its complexities are foregrounded upfront.

### **1.5. Research context**

The context in this research does not only imply the physical setting where the study takes place but also all the situational conditions in which events -in the case of this research learning events- occur. This section initially gives a brief description of the history of Algerian higher education and explains the structure of the current educational system. After that, this section explains the shift from the classical to the LMD system that characterises modern Algerian universities. Such descriptions foreground the situational context in which this research takes place.

#### **1.5.1. An overview on the Algerian higher education**

Algerian higher education has been expanding since the independence of the country. In 1962, there were only three higher education institutions that had fewer than 2000 students and a total of 250 teachers. According to the Union for Mediterranean Reports in 2021, the number of higher education establishments in Algeria now counts for 54 universities that hold more than 1.5 million students and over 50,000 teaching staff.

Universities in Algeria receive students who graduate from secondary schools. These students would need to pass the baccalaureate exam with an average that meets the threshold set by the university faculties to guarantee pedagogical placements in higher education. The choice

of the specialty to study is made by the students themselves. Nevertheless, their chances of joining the faculties they want are based on their baccalaureate marks and the availability of places at the destination university. Just like any other public educational establishment in Algeria, universities are famous for being tuition-free institutions for Algerians, which is a constitutional right. The Algerian government also takes part in financing university students with a small grant every three months, covering their meals, housing, and transportation expenses, which are supervised by the universities' accommodation offices.

When it comes to the organisation of the university, most, if not all, Algerian universities have similar governing bodies that are led by the ministry of higher education. The governing structure of universities is demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 1  
*The governing bodies of the Algerian university*



*Note.* Sourced form Arfaoui (2020)

The above-mentioned authorities are meant to keep the university self-sustained; they practically manage the university's internal and external affairs, but they are always under the supervision of the ministry of higher education and scientific research. The latter has always invested in the development of Algerian higher education since the country's independence. On that account, the decision to adopt a more contemporary educational system i.e., LMD was made to meet the demands of modern Algeria and the global market. This shall also be explained in the coming section.

### **1.5.2. From the classical to the License-Masters-Doctorate system (LMD)**

Post-colonial Algeria is known for two major reforms in the sector of higher education. The first is the classical system or as some prefer to call it 'the traditional system'. It entails four years of a BA degree, which is commonly known as a 'classical licence degree', two years of a Magister, and four years of a Doctorate. This system was criticised for not meeting the



demands of the new globalised world and the needs of the Algerian socio-economic environment. The classical system was characterised by its large number of classes, lack of modern teaching means, teachers' authoritarian instruction approaches, and the learners' passivity inside the classroom (Hadi, 2018). All these called for an intervention to launch the LMD (Licence-Masters-Doctorate) system, which is a reform meant to introduce contemporary pedagogies and bring students closer to the job market. The LMD reform was part of the Bologna process in 1999 to harmonise higher education across European countries. This was to guarantee the mobility and employability of citizens of those countries. Later, other non-EU countries joined the process, including North African countries like Tunisia and Morocco that took the initiative, and Algeria followed in 2004/2005. The LMD system was introduced as a revolutionary system that would upgrade higher education in Algerian universities to meet the challenges of globalisation. The transition from classical to LMD stumbled upon many hardships, particularly in the time when the two systems needed to co-exist, which created a lot of pressure on all parties at universities (Metatla, 2016). All this, along with the difficulties that both systems were already facing, like the lack of human resources, technology, and training (Bouhadiba, 2013). However, very soon, students, teachers, and administrators realised that the change to the LMD system is a fact now and that the shift from the classical to this new system has already happened.

The LMD system is different not only in its structure but also in its objectives, teaching approaches, and the materials required for its success. The reform aims to encourage research, bring students closer to the job market, and enable university graduates to attain transferable skills that would enable them to cope with the challenges of the modern world (Bouhadiba, 2013; Zitouni & Jaileb, 2014). These objectives led to a change in structure. Therefore, the four-year classical licence degree was reduced to three years, and the magister degree was replaced by a master's degree, which were also followed by the doctorate degree or PhD to be accomplished in a minimum period of three years. Studies in the LMD system consisted of lectures that are optional for students to attend and TDs/TPs which are tutorials or workshops that students are obliged to attend. Grading is based on the students' performance inside the classroom, their project work and exams which make most of the final mark in a module (MESRS, 2011). As for pedagogy, teachers under the LMD system need to adapt a learner-centred approach, which requires students to take the steering wheel in the

learning-teaching process by being active elements inside the classroom and outside of it (Idri, 2012). Moreover, technology seems to play an integral part in the learning/teaching setting to make the LMD system as successful as it was promoted. The learning/teaching endeavours that the LMD brings are intended to eventually produce autonomous learners. Having said this, in the following section I shall move to mapping this thesis by presenting its structure and the role of each of the chapters.

### **1.6. Thesis structure**

This study comprises six chapters, each serving a particular purpose to contribute to the making of a wholesome piece of research. Following the current introductory chapter, the **second chapter** is a critical review of the literature about learner autonomy. It presents scholarly debates about the issue of defining learner autonomy, and it intends to introduce the reader to the complexities of the concept. This chapter also reviews learner autonomy research in the Algerian context, and how the concept is described in the LMD system of Algerian higher education. Finally, the chapter identifies the gap in the literature to which this study contributes.

**Chapter three** concerns the methodological design of the research. It begins with stating my philosophical stances as the researcher of the current study. Then, it maps out the methodological decisions and procedures taken in the conduct of the practical side of this research. The chapter concludes by sharing some ethical practices and protocols that guided the conduct of this work.

**Chapter four** reports and illustrates the findings of the study as collected from students and teachers. This chapter consequently leads to **chapter five** which holds detailed discussions about the key findings of the research, which were organised according to the main questions that this research aims to answer. In addition, the discussion also draws correlations between the different findings of the research and the existing literature about learner autonomy.

**Chapter six** concludes the thesis by presenting the main takeaway findings of this research, which are eventually positioned within other works of learner autonomy in the Algerian context. The same chapter states the contributions that this research has made and presents its limitations. In the end, this chapter concludes with a section about future research

directions and recommendations for promoting learner autonomy based on the findings from this research.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

### 2.1. Introduction

The literature chapter is based on two key principles that should be put forward. The first one is that the discourse about learner autonomy has originated and has mainly been informed by western views (Schmenk, 2005). On that ground, this research argues that learner autonomy is not restrictedly attributed to western culture, and that autonomy exists in other cultural contexts in ways that academics may not recognise with their western eyes (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Schmenk, 2005; Smith et al., 2018). In this regard, this chapter shall first introduce the concept of learner autonomy by demonstrating how it correlates to cultural discussions. This shall also be followed by a discussion about the concept of autonomy from an Islamic perspective, which is a culturally relevant lens in this study's context.

The second principle is that the literature about learner autonomy is based on the domain of language learning (Little, 2003), and it surpasses research about learner autonomy beyond language learning contexts. This issue becomes confusing when language learner autonomy becomes the only type of autonomy recognised (Benson, 2013), especially since several scholarly definitions of the concept of learner autonomy take place in language learning contexts. To address this, the current literature chapter shall present a review of learner autonomy definitions where the concept is defined in general, in language learning, and in non-language learning domains. Having acknowledged this, the complexities of learner autonomy (which also originated from language learning domains) are explored in versions, dimensions, and models. This is followed by sections that explore learner autonomy outside the classroom, and the characteristics of autonomous learners.

The final elements of this chapter present a review of studies about learner autonomy in the Algerian context. Such contextualised investigations help in demonstrating the gap in the literature around this subject, particularly in the Algerian context.

### 2.1. Learner autonomy and culture

The discussion about learner autonomy and culture cannot be encapsulated in one section, but in this work, I shall highlight the main issues about how these two complex concepts correlate and why it is necessary to address culture in the case of this research. First, if we are to consider learner autonomy as a human capacity, then this capacity inescapably takes place

within a cultural framework, which shapes how autonomy is interpreted and eventually practised. This is one rationale behind this study which calls for culture-specific understandings of learner autonomy. Secondly, in the domain of language learning (which is one aspect of this research), culture and language are inseparable entities (Kuo & Lai, 2006). In fact, language is viewed as an extension of culture and is affiliated with learners' personal experiences and lives in general (Jiang, 2000). Therefore, it is something that accompanies learners and can be enriched in many ways, consciously or unconsciously. As for autonomy, it has a role in the way learners live their lives: the decisions they make, and the responsibilities they assume. Therefore, exploring autonomous language learning unavoidably leads to learning about the target culture and its values. Although I have repeatedly used the word culture in this section, the concept implies different meanings depending on the perspective from which one is viewing the concept. Consequently, these views of culture also impact how the concept of learner autonomy is viewed.

Much of the literature investigating learner autonomy adopts an "essentialist" view of culture. In this sense, culture is more or less the equivalent of "nationality" or "ethnicity". In this regard, Palfreyman and Smith (2003) said that "in work on learner autonomy, 'culture' has often been interpreted as national/ethnic culture." (p. 6). The nationalisation of culture regards learner autonomy as a western feature, associated with individualism and does not seem appropriate to non-western learners who are accustomed to authoritarian living and learning environments (Pennycook, 1997). Therefore, attempts to promote western views of autonomy in non-western contexts would first face values of individualism that non-western cultures may lack or not appreciate. Such a view of culture in learner autonomy discourse was referred to as a form of neo-imperialism that export teaching methods from western settings (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). Furthermore, this view of culture advocates the ethnocentricity of "learner autonomy" as a concept that is associated with individualization, which is inherently linked to liberal western countries. For more clarification, the concept "west/western" in this discussion refers to settings where the concept of learner autonomy was first investigated before becoming a `buzzword` in the 1990s. This concept, with its current use of meaning was first employed by (Benson, 2001).

National/ethnic culture is not the only way culture is viewed. Therefore, it is not the only way autonomy interacts with the term culture. Because essentialist views of culture were

criticised for being too general and inclusive (Mason, 2018), Holliday (1999) introduced the notion of “small culture” which he defined as an “interpretative device for understanding emergent behaviour” (p. 237). Small culture can vary to be as narrow as the ‘classroom culture’ where learners demonstrate certain ways of thinking and behaviours. These ‘small cultures’ are situated in and influenced by broader cultural contexts. In this vein, Palfreyman (2003) referred to Holliday (1994) about how “Japanese and an Algerian teacher of English may share some elements of a professional culture, but not a national/ethnic one” (p. 12) this example shows how ‘small cultures’ may intersect regardless of the national/ethnic cultures where they are situated. Palfreyman (2003) furthermore acknowledged the broadness of the ‘small cultures’. In that regard, they said they “are not simply an extension of them (national/ethnic cultures), and they have their own implications for autonomy.” (p. 12). In that regard, it is the cohesive social behaviour within the educational context that inhibits or promotes learner autonomy. This view gives less room for stereotyping and generalizing like in national/ethnic culture. In this vein, Harmer (2007) mentions that “attitudes to self-directed learning are frequently conditioned by the educational culture in which students have studied or are studying” (p. 394). Although educational and classroom culture provide a valid perspective from which autonomy in learning is discussed, this argument is often overshadowed by essentialist views of culture. As a result, learner autonomy remained a concept that its use was mainly associated with “western educational cultures” which were regarded as conventionally individualistic. Holliday (2003) tries to change the general stance that exclusively correlates learner autonomy with individualism by introducing the concept of “social autonomy”. This view suggests that autonomy is a pre-existing value that “resides in the social worlds of students” (p. 116). This way, learner autonomy would not be a commodity for any essentialist view of culture, or associated with a particular cultural group; rather, different types of autonomy would be found in different cultural contexts. In this regard, Schmenk (2005) also supports the idea that autonomy is not a monothetic concept, rather prolific and subject to “specific social, cultural, or institutional learning contexts” (p. 112).

The discussion about autonomy and culture is particularly important as it relates to the way people live their lives, which can potentially shape the way nations perceive one another. Palfreyman (2003) draws attention to the dangers of associating autonomy exclusively with western individualism and liberal values. Advocates of this view challenge the natural

humanistic psychological need for autonomy that the widely acknowledged self-determination theory presents (see section 2.2.1). Chirkov (2009) notes that it is argued that the term autonomy may sometimes have negative repercussions on the inhabitants of eastern nations because of their collectivist nature, which puts them in situations where autonomy is neither welcomed nor appreciated. Besides the fact that this argument is an oversimplification and an overgeneralization of eastern nations, recent research in psychology has provided tangible evidence about the cross-cultural validity and the need for self-determination for efficient and progressive task achievement regardless of one's ethnicity (Hagger et al., 2005) or gender (Grouzet et al., 2006). In addition, one might also ask about the alternative, where does arguing against the lack of autonomy lead? Chirkov (2009) comes back to answer this question by saying that "across cultures, when people view their behaviour as being non-autonomous, negative consequences for their well-being and efficiency result." (p. 254). This provides another rationale for the legitimate quest for and adoption of autonomy and autonomy-supportive practices. Moreover, presenting the argument that some social groups (non-western) are not fit for autonomy would not only postulate their unworthiness for social justice and their rights to live as nations with democratic and egalitarian ruling (Chirkov, 2009), but also deny them a universally acknowledged basic human need.

In the end, it is worth noting that acknowledging the importance and cross-cultural application of the concept of autonomy does not mean that it is not context sensitive. Several studies including this one, call for exploring how autonomy manifests with respect to the socio-cultural and context-specific fabric of the environment where the term is identified. Following this thread, I believe that it would be more useful to make the discussion relevant to the context of this research. This is done by discussing learner autonomy from the perspective of Islamic teachings, which are integral elements of the broad socio-cultural construct of Algerian society.

### **2.1.1. Learner autonomy from the perspective of Islam**

Although autonomy is known for its Greek origins, from which the term is derived, this concept gained popularity as a characteristic associated with western values of individualism, as noted in the section above. Such a view presented learner autonomy as a skill that non-western learners are not capable of. Nonetheless, investigations into eastern philosophies

like Confucius, Gandhian, and Islamic teachings seem to advocate autonomy in their own ways. For instance, there is a well-known Chinese proverb that says, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." In the African context, there is also a proverb that says, "A good father does not give his son meat. Instead, he gives him a bow and arrow, and teaches him to hunt" (Kuchah & Smith, 2011). In other words, help students become autonomous and depend on themselves and they will self-direct their learning.

This study is conducted in Algeria, a country that draws its laws from the Islamic religion, and the majority of its population are Muslims. Therefore, it would be plausible to explore the concept of autonomy from an Islamic perspective. First, if we are to refer to autonomy as free will and agency with the prior acceptance of responsibility, then Islam is one of the divine faiths that has protected these values; rather, they are fundamental in this religion. All people are born free and equal; therefore, individuals in Islam are free to make their own choices concerning all aspects of their lives. Knowing that Islamic practices are obligatory for only mature individuals, these practices are meaningless if they are not practised with full conviction and awareness of their importance. In this regard, the Holy Quran states that "there is no compulsion in religion; true guidance has become distinct from error" (chapter 2, verse 256).

Like any other religion, Islam has a bundle of rituals and obligations to be practised. Knowing that these practices are not to be separated from the religion per se means that there is no absolute autonomy or freedom in Islam. However, these notions are understood and defined within a religious and cultural framework that shows to what extent one's freedom can be practised. On the other hand, if this freedom is exercised more than it should by violating Islamic rules then consequences must be faced. Although the presented view of autonomy is not related to learning, it shows that this concept is not inherently western but exists in other cultural contexts where its meaning can be stretched to the domain of learning. In line with this thought, Islam made seeking knowledge a sacred duty. An Islamic proverb says, "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave." Also, the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) says, "Whoever takes a path in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to walk in one of the paths to Paradise. Indeed, the angels will lower their wings in great pleasure with the one who seeks knowledge". There are many quotes and stories in the Hadith and the Quran which



encourage individuals to seek knowledge and ask questions. But again, such values remain vague until interpreted in the specific context in which they are practised. For instance, although Muslims believe in metaphysical worlds and creatures like paradise, hell, angels etc, in Islam it is undesirable to ask profound questions about such things, as this might eventually lead to disbelief and blasphemy.

The previously given examples of learner autonomy acknowledge the existence of this concept in the Islamic teachings to which the majority of Muslim Algerians relate. This eventually leads to refuting ideas that say autonomy is a western characteristic based on western values. Having explained this, the following section holds a review of the most cited definitions of the concept of learner autonomy in the literature on this subject.

## **2.2. About the concept of learner autonomy**

The rationale for autonomy in learning is that teachers will not accompany learners throughout their entire lives. Therefore, learners need to be responsible for developing their own intellect and skills (Holec, 1988). With this idea in mind, research often attributes the accomplishment of autonomy to values of “freedom from reliance on others” (Benson & Voller, 1997), attitudes of “responsibility” (Dickinson, 1987; Scharle & Szabó, 2000), and “motivation” (Lamb, 2011). These qualities enable learners to have engaging and effective learning experiences. In this regard, Little (1994, as cited in Lai, 2017) noted that “all genuinely successful learning is in the end autonomous” (p. 3). Although these qualities stem from the literature about learner autonomy in the domain of language learning, it was indicated by Candy (1988) that some qualities of learner autonomy are trans-contextual. In other words, they do not only represent autonomy in language learning, but they also illustrate the broad meaning of the concept. In this section I shall explain how the concept of learner autonomy is defined in one of the major theories of motivation (SDT), how it is defined in the domain of language learning, and how this differs from autonomy in learning academic content knowledge. The threefold illustrations shall help in explaining differences in the use of the concept of autonomy in different areas and across domains.

### **2.2.1. Learner autonomy in self-determination theory**

One way to understand the notion of learner autonomy -perhaps in its broadest sense- is by exploring the self-determination theory (SDT), which considers autonomy a fundamental

value for motivation to occur. Self-determination theory is a psychological theory of motivation that was developed by Ryan and Deci (1985, 2000) who postulate that there are three universal innate psychological needs, namely, competence, autonomy, and relatedness. SDT argues that the quality of motivation has a direct impact on the performance of individuals when achieving tasks. The suggested psychological needs are key factors in producing quality motivation i.e., intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 1985) that helps people experience a joyful and spontaneous self-initiated behaviour. Having said this, I will first briefly discuss “competence” and “relatedness” in the coming two sections. After that, I will elaborate on the component of “autonomy”: how it is described in SDT and how it informs theories of motivation.

Competence in self-determination theory is defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as self-belief in one’s ability to perform well in an activity. This definition is based on the presumption that people have a psychological need that pushes them to gain mastery over what they do and develop their skills, and when individuals feel that they have or can gain the necessary skills to succeed, they become more engaged in achieving their assigned goals. For instance, in the context of sport, competence was noted as a great motivational aspect as it empowers individuals to become more confident and pushes them to their limits, which entails setting goals and achieving them (Reinboth & Duda, 2006). Ryan and Deci (2000) stress that in the theory of self-determination, individuals only need to perceive themselves as able to achieve the task at hand. When this is achieved, positive and corrective feedback, and constructive criticism from others like peers, supervisors or teachers would reinforce the individuals’ motivation and trust in their abilities to reach their goals, thereby, increasing their competence.

After establishing the argument that perceived competence is important in SDT, Ryan and Deci (2000) also acknowledged that no matter how competent people might feel, they will always be in need of others’ support. This brings us to the second psychological need that SDT suggests i.e., perceived relatedness with others in the community of involvement. Relatedness is about the sense of belonging and bonding to or within a group. Walsh, (2011) defined relatedness as a sense of shared experience, the social connection that individuals have and use to create a welcoming atmosphere to engage with tasks and achieve goals. In the domain of sports, Walsh (2011) noted that social connection is one of the most important

factors that motivates clients to keep coming for their physical activity sessions. What is interesting about relatedness is that although self-determination is a theory that advocates for intrinsic motivation, which should stem from within individuals, it also acknowledges the role of interpersonal connections that individuals form within society or communities of practice. This eventually contributes to individuals' intrinsic motivation. The psychological feeling of connectedness that people need does not only contribute to developing intrinsic motivation, but also the well-being of individuals, given the fact that humans are social beings that perform better on a psychological level when the environment is emotionally supportive (Ryan, 2009). Alternatively, lack of connectedness, which could be indicated through the lack of empathy, superficiality of connections, and feelings of alienation, can have a negative influence on individuals' internalisation of motivation, their well-being, and consequently their performance in achieving tasks.

Autonomy is recognised as one of the basic psychological needs of self-determination theory. It is related to feelings of volition and agency for decision-making and task conduct (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On that note, agency is also a unique concept that focuses on the importance of individuals as social beings that have their own feelings and are able to establish their own thinking, forge distinguished identities, and are capable of pursuing goals that interest them. The concept of agency feeds into the concept of autonomy, which entails "the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10), a sense of voluntariness to accept responsibilities and manage ones' own behaviour. The rationale behind autonomy in SDT is that people need to feel in control of making their decisions and behaviours. Such a feeling plays an important role in giving people a sense of empowerment which makes their actions more self-determined rather than being forced upon them. In this respect, Scot et al. (2014) noted that "Self-determination theory posits that autonomous forms of motivation produce more consistent and higher-quality behaviour than controlled forms of motivation" (p. 39).

Deci and Ryan (2000) elaborate on their use of the term autonomy by explaining that in SDT context, autonomy is more about that feeling of ownership and being in control rather than the act itself. Autonomy was conceptualised by Niemiec et al. (2006) as "experiencing a sense of choice, endorsement, and volition" (p. 763). Ryan and Deci (2006) elaborate on this point by saying that:

One can have many options and not feel autonomy, but instead feel overwhelmed and resentful at the effort entailed in the decision making. Alternatively, one could have only one option (which functionally means no choice) and yet feel quite autonomous so long as one truly endorses that option.

(Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1577)

The feeling of autonomy is not merely about the ability to make choices but also about the feeling that actions and behaviours are in alignment with one's own values. Naxer (2019) explained that being able to independently make your own choices is certainly one way to feel volitional engagement, however, this is not the only way to achieve autonomy. To elaborate, a student may not make decisions about what to study, how to study, or in what ways they are evaluated. Nonetheless, if these decisions align with the students' personal academic agenda and if they enable students to engage in a comprehensive learning experience, then these students are considered autonomous from the perspective of self-determination theory.

The literature about learner autonomy as a motivational concept remains relatively limited. In fact, investigating learner autonomy often leads to tracing this concept back to the domain of language learning, where it is mostly discussed. As a result of the extensive research about the notion of learner autonomy in language learning domains, many researchers and educators use "learner autonomy" as a kind of shorthand for "language learner autonomy" (Benson, 2013). This eventually opened gates for confusion due to a lack of contextualization in research, which mostly recognises learner autonomy as explained in language learning contexts. This issue was particularly investigated by Lee (2017) who indicated that it is important to distinguish between autonomy in self-determination theory and autonomy in language learning. Lee (2017) explained that autonomy in language learning means that "learners determine learning goals; select learning content, materials, and methods; monitor their own progress; and evaluate learning outcomes" (p. 221) as indicated in Holec's (1981) definition of LA. However, autonomy in SDT is not associated with any type of learning domain. Evidently, indeed language researchers and educators could learn from autonomy in SDT. However, it would be more useful for them to focus on how autonomy is manifested and promoted in the specific domain of language learning. This is for the differences and challenges that inherently come with language learning in comparison to learning other non-

language-related subjects. Having explained what autonomy means in the framework of self-determination theory and how it contributes to forming self-determined motivation, the following section shall expand on the concept of autonomy in the domain of language learning.

### **2.2.2. Learner autonomy in the domain of foreign language learning**

Learner autonomy and language learning seem to be two integrated domains. Little et al. (2017) referred to language learner autonomy as a “special case of learner autonomy” (p. 12) because of the complexity of both how `language` is learned and how `autonomy` is developed. However, the reason why the concept has become the centre of attention when learning languages is that learning a language takes more than the limited hours that learners spend inside the classroom. In fact, it requires learners to be fairly invested in the learning process, which is what autonomous learning entails. For instance, learning English within and beyond the classroom offers more chances for target language use, which is very important in language learning (Najeeb, 2013). This highlights the principles underpinning learner autonomy, which puts more focus on the active involvement of learners. In this regard, many researchers and educators like Littlewood (1999), Oxford (2008), Benson (2011), and Sella (2014) acknowledged the effectiveness of the notion of learner autonomy in language learning and invited to promote it.

Because much attention is paid to learner autonomy in the domain of language learning, different interpretations of the concept were proposed by a variety of scholars who followed on Holec (1981) definition of “taking charge of one`s own learning” (p. 3). For instance, Dickinson (1987) defined learner autonomy as “the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions” (p. 11) (as cited in Finch, 2002). However, Dickinson explained that this would be “full-autonomy”, which reflects a situation where the learner is entirely independent of teachers, institutions, or specially prepared materials (Benson, 2013). As this cannot be achieved in an educational institution governed by laws, and in which students study pre-defined curricula, Dickinson (1987) introduced the concept of “semi-autonomy” which is a situation where learners take partial responsibility for making learning decisions. Dickinson’s suggestion entails that this is not autonomy but more of a preparatory stage for learners to have more learning responsibilities and control in later stages.

One of the major contributors to the concept of learner autonomy is Little (1991) who followed on Holec's definition by saying that learner autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4). What can be understood from this definition is that autonomous learners are able to learn independently from others, understand the purpose of their learning, and contribute to it. Benson (2013) reflected on this definition by saying that, Little (1991) puts much focus on the cognitive processes involved in autonomous learning rather than the technical-organisational processes as described in definitions by Holec (1981) and Dickinson (1987). Also, in these two definitions, learner autonomy is referred to as an ability that learners have, while in Little (1991) and Littlewood (1996), the concept of learner autonomy is referred to as a 'capacity' that humans possess and develop through practice. In this regard, Littlewood (1996) refers to "an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions" (p. 428). Littlewood proceeds by saying that this capacity requires learners to possess both ability and willingness, which are two important ingredients for independent action.

The attempts to define the concept of learner autonomy continue with Benson (2011), who suggested that learner autonomy is "the capacity to take control over one's own learning" (p. 2). Benson introduced and stressed the notion 'control' in his definition. Control was a term used to describe learner autonomy in several works, like in Bernat and Mueller (2013) where it was mentioned that "autonomy is the need for a person to feel he or she is in direct control of the work he or she is doing" (p. 74). Benson's definition stressed the notion of 'control over the learning content' in educational settings. His definition changed the focus of learner autonomy from the learner making decisions regarding his/her learning methodological approaches to cover learner responsibilities in making decisions about the content being learned. As a result, Benson stimulated the discussion about the conflict between learners, teachers, and educational institutions. In such discussions, Benson (2013) states that the learners' decision about the content they study is essential to autonomy, and if learners "do not learn what they want to learn, their learning may not be authentically self-directed." (p. 112).

The definitions of learner autonomy mentioned above are the most frequently cited in the literature around this topic. Although they seem to have some differences in the way they

describe autonomy as an ability, capacity, or control, these differences do not seem to hide the plain consensus about the positive outcome of the concept in the field of education and specifically in language learning. In this regard, Oxford (2003) suggested that a richer and stronger understanding of learner autonomy would be provided if consideration is given to different definitions describing this concept.

Finally, although the definitions discussed above are proposed by scholars in the domain of foreign language learning, the same definitions can also inform the discussion about learner autonomy in other non-language domains. However, this might have resulted in the concept of learner autonomy to be viewed as being solely interrelated with the sphere of language learning. Such endeavours often lead to adopting principles of language learner autonomy when promoting for the concept in contexts where learning the language is not the primary objective. In that regard, the current work distinguishes between language learner autonomy as explained in this section, and autonomy in learning discipline-based, knowledge which is discussed in the following one.

### **2.2.3. Autonomy in learning discipline-based knowledge**

The concept of learner autonomy gained popularity in language learning contexts. However, this does not make it any less worthy of an educational goal in other non-language-related domains. Learner autonomy in discipline-based knowledge is an issue of interest to many scholars who have tried to understand the concept and how to promote it in a variety of domains like music (Cheng et al., 2020), mathematics (Sachdeva, 2019), and physics (Hall & Webb, 2014). However, these studies remain relatively small in comparison to the ones conducted in the domain of language learning. In addition to this, these works, adopt an understanding of learner autonomy as generated in language learning contexts. In that regard, Little (2003) noted that “learning how to learn a second or foreign language is in some important respects different from learning how to learn maths or history or biology” (p. 2). In other words, the approach that students might use to learn a foreign language is different to the one used in learning other subjects. In the light of this thought, Candy (1988) suggests that understanding learner autonomy is subject to the learning context. On that account, he presented the concept of subject-matter learner autonomy, which aims at learning academic knowledge rather than language skills.

Subject-matter learner autonomy is about the specialised knowledge that learners aim to attain. Candy (1988) noted that autonomy in regard to a particular subject matter entails different academic practices for language learning and aims to achieve different learning goals. While the former aims to enable learners to gain better command over their communicative skills, the latter to develop learners' understanding of their subjects of interest and their critical skills. In that regard, Candy (1988) suggested that "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 this definition, there is an emphasis on critical skills as an indication of autonomous learning. Following on his definition by exploring the complexity of autonomy when learning subject matters, Candy (1988) mentioned that "when it comes to learning discipline-based knowledge, there is a significant inequality between the students (as novice) and the teachers (as experts) in terms of their current capacity to understand and assess ideas and arguments of a field" (Strike, 1982, p. 49, as cited in Candy, 1988, p. 75). This explanation indicates that students may not have sufficient knowledge and skills about their subject areas to be qualified to give critics or be involved in making decisions about the subject they learn. In this regard, Hand (2006) states that "a person is only truly autonomous when her decisions are not affected by what she wants or likes or cares about but are determined by pure practical reason alone." (p. 541). Therefore, in some cases, it is more convenient for students to depend on their teachers at least at the beginning of their learning of new subjects. Candy (1988) goes even further to assert the highly situation-specific, or content dependent nature of subject matter autonomy. For instance, being autonomous in one domain does not necessarily mean that one is automatically autonomous in other domains. This view gives importance to the situational factors that compels learners to first depend on their teachers or instructors when learning new domains, regardless of their autonomous learning skills in other areas of learning. On that account, Candy (1988) suggests that students in such circumstances could willingly ask to depend on their teachers as a high order form of autonomy by making the decision to rely on more expert others.

Candy's discourse on learner autonomy implies the need to define this concept as it is practised by autonomous learners. Such a view invites us to consider the learning contexts which play a great role in shaping the meaning of learner autonomy and indicating its



supportive practices. After presenting language learner autonomy, and autonomy in learning discipline-based knowledge, the coming sections will shed light on notions often confused with learner autonomy and often associated with it.

### **2.3. Notions similar to learner autonomy**

In the research about learner autonomy, there are several concepts like self-instruction, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, and independent learning that are sometimes treated as synonymous with the notion of learner autonomy. Although these concepts share some characteristics of learner autonomy, none of them fully describe what learner autonomy entails. For that reason, this section describes the different concepts often confused with learner autonomy.

#### **2.3.1. Self-instruction**

Teaching oneself is probably the concept that is mostly confused with learner autonomy, as mentioned in Little (1991), where it was stated that "perhaps the most widespread misconception is that autonomy is synonymous with self-instruction; that it is essentially a matter of deciding to learn without a teacher." (p.3). Also, Dafei (2007) mentioned that "autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms of 'self-instruction', 'self-access', 'self-study', 'self-education', 'out-of-class learning,' or 'distance learning'. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by yourself" (p. 5). However, self-instruction seems to agree to some point with learner autonomy. For instance, Dafei (2007) mentioned that "autonomous learners may well be better than others at learning by themselves" (p. 3). The difference between the two concepts can also be seen in the dynamics of learning in both. Learner autonomy is based on the principle of freedom in learning, and this leaves a broad space for learners to possibly choose their learning content, learning methods, and strategies. For instance, autonomous learners can choose to depend on others, collaborate with them, or work on their own, all depending on the learner and the conditioning circumstances. However, self-instruction, as illustrated by Little (1991), is based on the idea of teaching oneself, and this does not reflect the social aspect of learner autonomy. Therefore, it is more associated with individualised learning, which is not the only aspect that learner autonomy implies.

### **2.3.2. Self-directed learning**

This is a term first mentioned by Malcom (1975), who describes it as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 17). It is a type of learning that is mostly considered by adults when describing learning activities outside the traditional classroom, and it involves aspects of designing one's own learning environment (Saks & Leijen, 2014). The distinction between self-directed learning and learner autonomy was made by Benson (2013), where self-directed learning was referred to as a mode of learning that entailed "learning that is carried out under the learner's own direction" (p. 37), whereas learner autonomy is the capacity that learners possess. While learner autonomy comes in degrees or stages, like `reactive autonomy` which entails learners engaging in autonomous learning when a direction is created by teachers or instructors, self-directed learning is not used in the same manner. For this reason, Benson (2013) mentioned that "self-directed learning can be considered as something that learners are able to do more or less effectively, according to the degree that they possess this capacity (learner autonomy)." (p. 37). In other words, learner autonomy is a prerequisite for self-directed learning to occur. That is to say, the extent to which learners self-direct their learning depends on the extent to which they are autonomous.

### **2.3.3. Self-regulated learning**

This concept mostly refers to learners planning and managing learning priorities, time, and feelings by themselves. Hence, it would only reflect "technical autonomy", which concerns the managerial aspect of the concept (Benson, 2013). On the other hand, learner autonomy can also be viewed through political and psychological lenses. In that regard, the concept of autonomy means to self-govern (Voltz, 2008). Therefore, autonomy in learning revolves around having the freedom to make learning decisions about one's own learning, as entailed in Holec's (1981) definition. On that account, if this discussion takes place within a classroom context, then the political aspect of learner autonomy projects a conflict of power between students and teachers (Benson, 2013).

The difference between learner autonomy and self-regulated learning also extends to involve that learner autonomy is not connected to specific skills and observable behaviours. In other

words, there is not a consequential model of practices about how exactly one can attain autonomy. However, numerous detailed dynamic models of self-regulated learning proliferate in the literature about the concept, like the ones suggested by Zimmerman (1990), Efklides (2011), and Järvelä (2011). However, it appears that the most fundamental difference between self-regulated learning and learner autonomy is that the latter is a capacity or an ability that learners can practise, whereas self-regulated learning is a process that learners engage in.

#### **2.3.4. Independent learning**

This is probably one of the concepts that is most commonly used interchangeably or as a near-synonym with learner autonomy (Healey, 2014; Najeeb, 2013). Independent learning follows the same managerial principles as self-directed and self-regulated learning. The major difference between learner autonomy and independent learning is the context of use in the domain of language learning or education in general. Thomas (2014) defined independent learning as being undertaken outside contact hours but contributing to course-specific learning outcomes that fall within the trajectory of the learning programme. The latter is already determined by the educational institution, whereas learner autonomy as a capacity is not bound to a particular learning context and does not necessarily seek to complement a certain learning programme. Although it was made clear in the literature that independent learning does not mean anti-social or solitude in learning (Knight, 1996), the concept of "*interdependence*," as suggested by Little (1991), is considered more accurate to describe learner autonomy. This is mainly because it explicitly entails flexibility in both the individual and social interactional aspects of autonomy in learning.

In the end, the differences between the concepts discussed above are very subtle. Each of the concepts reflects some part of the construct of learner autonomy. Therefore, they seem to have many features in common. This makes recognising similarities between the concepts a lot easier than their differences. Consequently, a need for concept clarification is raised on the horizon. Thus far, I shall shift attention to exploring versions and models of learner autonomy in language learning in the succeeding sections. Such discussion should provide more details and clarifications about the complexities of learner autonomy.

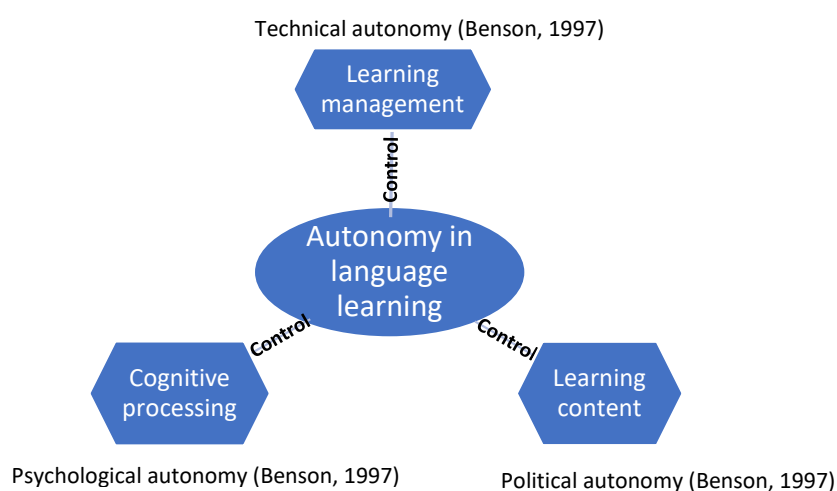
## 2.4. Dimensions of learner autonomy

Two of the major contributions made in learner autonomy research are the dimensions proposed for this concept by Benson (2011), Benson & Voller (1997), and Littlewood (1996, 1999). Ecclestone (2002) acknowledged that such classifications are indeed founded in language learning contexts. However, they can be equally applied to other academic domains simply because they connect to theories about knowledge like positivism, constructivism, and critical theory, as was made clear in Benson and Voller (1997). For this research, these dimensions inform the discussion about learner autonomy in both language learning and subject-knowledge-based domains.

### 2.4.1. Benson's (1997-2001)

Benson (1997) initially proposed versions of learner autonomy. These versions were technical, i.e., autonomy in managing one's own learning; psychological, i.e., autonomy in developing a psychological relationship to the learning process; and political, i.e., autonomy in defining one's own learning content. These versions informed the currently discussed dimensions of learner autonomy, which are grounded in the notion of 'control'. In that regard, Benson (2001) defines learner autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning. This capacity manifests in three dimensions: control over learning management, control over the cognitive process, and control over the learning content. The correlation between versions and dimensions of learner autonomy is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2  
*Dimensions of learner autonomy*



*Note.* Sourced from (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997)

As indicated in the figure above, what was described as the technical version of learner autonomy in Benson (1997) became control over learning management in Benson (2001). This area of learner autonomy is associated with learning management. According to Benson (2013), technical autonomy is mainly about the techniques and strategies that autonomous learners use to learn the target language. In other words, it is more conceptualised as a set of skills or tools that can be delivered to learners so they can direct their own learning, and this implies a positivist philosophy of learning. On that account, taking control over learning management is supported by the teacher, who is presented as the "technical expert" who can transfer autonomous learning skills to their students (Vieira, 2012, as cited in Hamad, 2018). Although deciding one's own learning strategies and techniques is important in autonomous learning, it is not what learner autonomy is all about, simply because learning also involves psychological and cognitive characteristics that should be covered when defining learner autonomy.

The second dimension of learner autonomy is control over cognitive processes. This is based on the psychological dimension of learner autonomy, which emphasises the unobservable learning decisions that learners make. This was first noted by Little (1991), who mentioned that learner autonomy entails having a psychological disposition that helps learners develop a particular relationship to the process and the content of their learning. This psychological relationship stresses the motivational, emotional, and cognitive processes of learners (Benson, 1997). Therefore, autonomy in this area implies having the attitude of detaching oneself from external control and thinking critically and creatively (Benson, 2013).

The third dimension of learner autonomy concerns "control over content" in the language classroom, and it reflects the political version of learner autonomy. To Benson, control over what students learn is fundamental. However, this sometimes might bring learners, -as authors of their own learning- into conflict with teachers and institutions whose interests might differ from the ones of their learners. The political version of learner autonomy was described in Benson (2013) as "controversial" because it challenges the power of teachers and institutional regulations. However, it is regarded as having a "transformative character of autonomy" (p. 60) for its potential to make not only learners who are responsible for creating the content of learning but also responsible citizens who contribute to making a change in the community. Therefore, the political dimension of learner autonomy is not confined to the

pedagogical practices inside the classroom but also encompasses learners as critical individuals in their society.

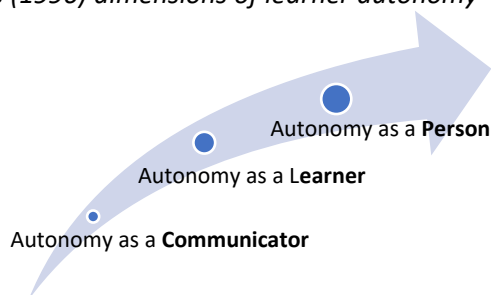
Besides the three versions/dimensions of learner autonomy explained above, Oxford (2003) suggested a "socio-cultural" version of the concept in which emphasis is put on the context in which autonomy is practised. Oxford (2003) criticises Benson's versions of learner autonomy by describing them as "fragmentary" (p. 76), and they neglect the socio-cultural aspect of the notion of learner autonomy, which occurs in socio-cultural contexts from which the concept should be understood. Oxford (2003) criticised Benson's (1997) political version of learner autonomy, saying that it is not suitable for academic contexts. On that account, Oxford (2003) asserts that her suggested versions of learner autonomy "can also be understood in a less political light" (p. 85). However, that is if the aim is not to change society but for learners to change their mentality by looking beyond their cultural boundaries and defying conventional ideologies within specific locations.

Indeed, Benson's versions inform the discussion about the concept of learner autonomy. However, Benson (2013) went back to criticise this, saying that "in more recent work, I have found the idea of versions of autonomy less useful" (p. 63). To him, such a classification was too theoretical, and political autonomy is more "ideologically sound". Benson (2013) adds that the development of learner autonomy fairly depends on "the goals and desires of the learners and contextual conditions" (p. 63). Such a suggestion links to the current research, where the emphasis is on students' learning objectives and the contextual variables shaping their understandings and practices of learner autonomy. In addition to this, Benson (2013) acknowledged that there are other ways to divide learner autonomy, like Littlewood's model, which will be discussed in the following section.

#### **2.4.2. Littlewood's (1996-1999)**

Littlewood proposed two models; the first one was in 1996, and it is based on three areas: *autonomy as a communicator*, *autonomy as a learner*, and finally *autonomy as a person*. The latter is considered the ultimate goal of the notion of autonomy as it outreaches the domain of learning to contribute to the making of independent, critical, and responsible citizens. These three dimensions are demonstrated in the figure below.

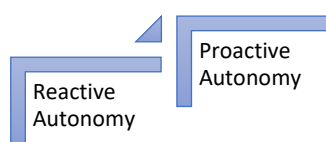
Figure 3  
*Littlewood's (1996) dimensions of learner autonomy*



First, autonomy as a communicator concerns learners' ability to communicate successfully and use the necessary strategies to understand and be understood by others in the target language and in personal situations. The second dimension (autonomy as a learner) concerns learning in general. This involves learners properly selecting and using skills and strategies in learning a foreign language or any other learning objective. As for the last area in Littlewood's proposed dimensions, it concerns the learner as a person and their autonomy as a lifestyle, but not only in learning domains. Benson (2013) argues that autonomy as a person emerges from the first area (autonomy as a communicator), especially since it also consists of communicating personal thoughts. Therefore, this model of learner autonomy might not include components that are in one linear approach, but these components seem to interrelate and contribute to one another in interesting ways that need more research.

The second model, which was also introduced by Littlewood (1999), looked at learner autonomy from a different perspective. Littlewood proposed that there should be a distinction between what he called "proactive and reactive autonomy," as shown in the figure below.

Figure 4  
*Littlewood's (1999) model of learner autonomy*



The distinction that Littlewood (1999) made between "reactive autonomy" and "proactive autonomy" was based on the level of self-regulation. While proactive autonomy involves

learners regulating their own learning goals and the activities involved in their learning, reactive autonomy entails learners regulating their learning tasks after a direction has been set (Littlewood, 1999). Littlewood goes on to associate proactive learner autonomy with the discussion about this notion in the western context and links it to Holec's (1981) definition of the notion of LA, which involves learners setting their own learning objectives. Littlewood (1999) calls for considering the second type of autonomy, which is `reactive`, particularly in the domain of education. The latter was suggested to be used as a preliminary stage for more proactive autonomy. Unlike Littlewood's first model, which was based on a language learning situation before moving to a broader illustration of autonomy as a lifestyle, the second model concerned the educational context. The "reactive/proactive" autonomy model that Littlewood introduced is conceptualised from pedagogical practices in contexts where learners may not create their learning goals. However, they are able to manage other aspects of their learning. In that regard, Littlewood (1999) added that in educational contexts, reactive autonomy could stand as an end-goal per se. In the end, the usefulness of both models of learner autonomy was acknowledged by many researchers who used these conceptualizations of learner autonomy to develop models to promote this notion (Benson, 2013; Hamilton, 2013). After shedding some light on the dimensions of learner autonomy, the coming section will present models that are often used to develop learner autonomy in language learning contexts.

## **2.5. Models for developing learner autonomy in language learning and beyond**

There have been many attempts to form models that would help learners embrace a more autonomous type of learning, as suggested by Nunan (1997), Scharle and Szabó (2000), and Kannan and Miller (2009). Indeed, most of these models were mainly found in the language learning domain, which is only one aspect of this research. However, they can also potentially inform current research about learner autonomy in general in terms of how it manifests and how it can be promoted. The afore-mentioned models are first presented in the table below, followed by detailed illustrations about the stages in each of the given models.



Table 1  
*Models for the development of learner autonomy*

Authors	Proposed models
<b>Nunan (1997)</b>	Awareness Involvement Intervention Creation Transcendence
<b>Scharle and Szabó (2000)</b>	Raising Awareness Changing attitudes Transferring roles
<b>Kannan and Miller (2009)</b>	Changes in feeling toward the course Changes in comfort level and skill with the online learning environment Change in performance in course assignments Demonstration of learner autonomy

### 2.5.1. Nunan's (1997) model

Nunan's five-degree model suggests guiding learners to perform a set of consecutive cognitive and behavioural actions elaborated in stages, namely, awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. All this presents a gradual development model of learner autonomy. The first phase of Nunan's model (*awareness*) consists of explicitly explaining the learning objectives to learners. Hence, they become aware of their learning goals and the materials that will be used to achieve those goals. *Involvement* is the following level of LA, which entails enabling learners to choose learning goals from a range of options. The third stage is *intervention*, which is the level where learners can modify their learning goals. This would gradually take learners to *creation*, which is the stage where learners are able to create their own goals and learning tasks. The last stage is *transcendence*; at this level, learning goes beyond the classroom and learners are able to make connections between classroom learning and the outside world.

Although Nunan's model seems to be very organised, it faced some critiques about being too general, too theoretical, and it does not reflect the complexity of the concept of learner autonomy when practised in a real context. In light of these thoughts, Dang (2012) explained that learners do not necessarily need to stick to the order of steps presented in Nunan's model. Dang gave the example of Chinese learners who do not favour choosing objectives and tasks from a range of alternatives. In fact, they prefer the flexibility to create new content

and tasks, thus skipping level two in Nunan's model. This confirms the difficulty of the absolute generalizability of this model, which could not be fully adopted in Chinese learners' situations and possibly many other contexts.

### **2.5.2. Scharle and Szabo (2000)**

This three-stage model was based on developing learners' responsibility inside the classroom, which should increase with each of the following phases. The first proposed step is "raising awareness". Scharle and Szabó (2000) argue that learners should become aware of the nature of the target language and, more importantly become aware of the difference their contribution can make inside the classroom. The second step is "changing attitudes", which includes some practices that aim to habituate the strategies that have been introduced in the first stage. In these two first stages, there is more focus on increasing motivation, familiarising learners with learning strategies, community building, which is an exercise to increase learners' interdependence, and lastly, self-monitoring. However, activities are less tightly structured in the second stage, which requires learners to demonstrate more initiative and responsibility. The last step is "transferring roles". At this point, learners should be ready and able to take over some roles from their teacher.

Scharle and Szabó's (2000) model describes the exercises that should be used to gradually lead students from dependence to autonomy in language learning. Nevertheless, this model gives the impression that it targets beginner language learners, making it not suitable for advanced language learners, particularly those at university. In the end, this model shares a few characteristics with some elements that Nunan (1997) described in his model, namely increasing awareness towards learner autonomy, and the gradual involvement of the learner in "the process of autonomization" (Little, 2003).

### **2.5.3. Kannan and Miller (2009)**

The model proposed by Kannan and Miller is based on empowering learners' autonomy in a computer-mediated environment. In their work, Kannan and Miller (2009) presented a model based on two case studies of students who abandoned their teacher-dependent learning behaviour to embrace a more autonomous and independent learning approach with computer-assisted learning. In their model, Kannan and Miller first noted that students have a negative attitude towards using technology in learning and in learning communications. Therefore, this phase was characterised by anxiety, anger, and resistance to change.

However, soon (in phase 2), students started to change their attitudes towards the use of technology that they used to complete their assignments and homework. In the third phase, students started demonstrating some identifiable transition behaviours marked by more engagement inside the classroom, where they also demonstrated critical thinking skills. The last phase of this model is the demonstration of learner autonomy. According to Kannan and Miller (2009), at the end of the experiment, their participants demonstrated interest in the content that they studied by going beyond the prescribed course materials. Moreover, the participants became more engaging and inquisitive within and beyond the classroom.

Perhaps the first thing that can be noted about the model proposed by Kannan and Miller (2009) is that it is not based on a language learning context. Therefore, autonomy in this context did not entail transferring roles, as indicated in the language learning models by Nunan (1997) and Scharle and Szabó (2000). However, autonomy in this context was reflected in the last stage of the model, where students were able to further their knowledge about what they studied by going beyond the prescribed curriculum and demonstrating active classroom engagement and critical thinking skills. In the end, such an understanding of learner autonomy seems to reflect Littlewood's (1999) conceptualization of "reactive autonomy," in which students only take control over their learning after the learning path is created for them.

Thus far, the discussion about the concept of learner autonomy has concerned aspects like the definitions of the concept, the perspectives from which it is viewed, and the levels or degrees identified in autonomous learning. The following section shall shift the focus to the autonomous learner after having discussed the concept itself.

## **2.6. Characteristics of autonomous learners**

The broadness of the concept of learner autonomy, its complexity, and its multidimensionality makes it very hard to define. Perhaps another way to understand learner autonomy is by describing what makes learners autonomous, which is what this section aims to do.

Research about the notion of learner autonomy in general and in language learning yielded several characteristics attributed to autonomous learners, many of which are inspired by definitions of the concept. For instance, in the definitions of learner autonomy by Holec

(1988), "taking charge of one's own learning," and Little (1991), "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4), these two definitions seem to refer to the learners' ability to act independently as a trait that characterises autonomous learners. Alongside independence, Scharle and Szabó (2000) emphasise responsibility as one of the integral characteristics of autonomous learners. In their model, Scharle and Szabó mainly focus on raising learners' awareness and changing classroom roles to encourage students to assume more responsibility for their learning. In other words, it is the high sense of responsibility that characterises autonomous learners. Other definitions emphasised the ability to control different aspects of learning, like in Benson (2013), whereas others emphasised the learners' willingness and motivation (Lamb, 2011; Littlewood, 1999). While the above-mentioned characteristics are inspired by recognised definitions of learner autonomy, other scholars have also attributed other characteristics to what is to be considered an autonomous learner. These characteristics are presented in the following table.

Table 2  
*Characteristics of autonomous learners*

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Proposed models</b>
<b>Nunan (1995)</b>	"The fully autonomous learner, therefore, operates independently of the classroom, teacher or textbook" (p. 193).
<b>Gardner and Miller (1999)</b>	"Those who 'initiate the planning and implementation of their learning program'" (p. vii).
<b>Pichugova et al. (2016)</b>	"Autonomous learners are responsible, flexible, and curious; they see the need to learn, hold a positive attitude towards learning, set their objectives, plan their learning, explore available learning opportunities and resources, use a variety of strategies, interact effectively with others, monitor their progress, reflect on and evaluate their learning, rationalize their actions, are aware of alternative learning strategies, are aware of their cognitive abilities and learning style, transfer what they have learned to wider contexts and, finally, appreciate that their efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly" (p. 2).
<b>Rinekso and Kurniawan (2020)</b>	"Autonomous learners are methodological & disciplined, logical & analytical, reflective & self-aware, demonstrate curiosity & motivation, flexible, interdependent & interpersonally competent, persistent & responsible, venturesome & creative, show confidence & have a positive self-concept, independent & self-sufficient, have developed information seeking & retrieval skills, have knowledge about & skill at learning process, and develop & use criteria for evaluating" (p. 103-104).

The quotes above entail a variety of characteristics attributed to autonomous learners. Many of the characteristics mentioned above, like creativity, confidence, curiosity, and persistence, are psychological and cognitive characteristics related to the learners' personality, which is an internal factor that affects the learners' autonomy. In addition to psychological characteristics, the quotes also indicate some organisational skills that autonomous learners are recognised for their discipline, reflection, and being methodical in learning. Although these traits are said to be related to autonomous learners, they also seem to reflect the image of "the good learner" as described in many works like Sewell (2003) and Lightbown and Spada (1997), where creativity, organisation skills, and motivation are stressed on.

In the domain of language learning, Robertson (2013) mentioned that "good language learners are autonomous learners who actively seek out and employ a variety of learning strategies that match their styles/characteristics" (p. 2). This establishes a connection between the characteristics of the autonomous and the good language learner. Nevertheless, the question that should be asked here is whether learners need to have all the previously mentioned characteristics to be recognised as autonomous. In this regard, Rinekso and Kurniawan (2020) followed up on their list of characteristics of autonomous learners by saying that "it is not mandatory to obtain all of those characteristics" (p. 104). In the same vein, Ghazali (2020) described learner autonomy as "not an all-or-nothing concept" (p. 118), which means that learners do not have to have all learner autonomy-related traits to be considered autonomous. In this research, I share similar views to Bendebiche (2022), who advocates for "a more broad and holistic approach to autonomy that does not limit our view to pre-defined sets of characteristics" (p. 54). Therefore, instead of assigning definite characteristics to autonomous learners, it would be more reasonable to refer to the initial argument in this research about the importance of learning context and culture in defining what learner autonomy is. This would eventually help identify what characteristics should be attributed to autonomous learners in the relevant contexts. Perhaps another way to problematize the argument about the characteristics of autonomous learners is by acknowledging that they remain a matter of research and debate. In this regard, Benson (2011) noted that only relatively little is known about how autonomous learning behaviours work to foster autonomy and how they confluence with contextual factors about learner autonomy. Therefore, the current research has the potential to add more insight about this area of

learner autonomy since it tackles both the characteristics of autonomous learners and the learning practices associated with autonomy in the context of this study.

In the end, autonomous learners stand out with their distinguishing characteristics in comparison to those who are not autonomous. The characteristics of autonomous learners give more of an idealistic picture of a learner who is self-sufficient, resourceful, and *inter/independent* which is the type of learner that all teachers aspire to have. Because such descriptions of autonomous learners often address learners in academic settings, the following section will shed some light on how learner autonomy is described in informal contexts.

### **2.7. Beyond classroom autonomous learning**

Much of the research about the concept of learner autonomy is framed inside the classroom. Only little research has looked at this concept outside of formal institutional settings (Mideros, 2021; Reinders & Benson, 2017). In the domain of language learning, Lai et al. (2017) mentioned that "researchers' understanding of learner autonomy out of class language learning is still quite limited" (p. 5), probably because it is inside the classroom context where teachers can guide their students to becoming autonomous. However, outside the classroom, learner autonomy is an end goal in itself. In that respect, Littlewood (1999) acknowledged that learner autonomy stems from the basic idea that teachers will not be there to assist their learners their whole lives. Therefore, the latter should be prepared to take on the responsibility of learning by themselves after their formal education. This idea gave legitimacy to learner autonomy as a valid educational goal in general, which consequently shifted the discussion about learner autonomy being promoted in classroom environments.

Incorporating learner autonomy inside the classroom has always faced the challenges of institutional regulation and the teachers as authority figures, and this clashes with the principles of freedom and independence in learner autonomy. These challenges do not apply outside the classroom environment, where learners are already free of such constraints. However, this would necessitate learners having already acquired a capacity for learner autonomy for learning in such an environment to be exerted. In this regard, in Bayat (2011),

autonomous learners are described as those who seek opportunities to learn outside the classroom setting and create their own instructional settings freed from the teacher.

In the field of foreign language learning, Benson (2013) mentioned that "it is widely acknowledged that out-of-class learning makes a significant contribution to higher levels of language proficiency." (p. 138). Hence, informal learning settings are an asset for language learners to explore the wide range of materials on offer. The benefits of outside classroom learning are articulated by several researchers like Lai et al. (2017) and Öztürk (2020) who said that "engaging in autonomous outside classroom learning activities improves not only learners' academic achievements and performance but also contributes to the process of becoming autonomous and self-regulated learners" (p. 147). In other words, students who are volitionally involved in learning activities outside the classroom are more likely to develop a self-regulatory and autonomous learning aptitude. Staying in touch with the target language after the classroom time somehow also complies with the objective of learner autonomy as an educational goal as described by Littlewood (1999) earlier in this section, which is a skill that can be stretched to other areas of one's life.

The general view that can be drawn from learner autonomy outside the classroom is that it is an end goal per se for learners to be able to continue learning when their classes are finished. However, it is also a means that contributes to the learners' academic achievement as it provides real opportunities for learners to engage in a type of learning that genuinely contributes to their autonomy, far from any institutional constraints. Having affirmed that learner autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom, this research conforms to Sinclair (2000), who urges us to look closely at learner autonomy in both contexts. This is particularly important because learning within and beyond the classroom has proven many times to complement each other. This is through the skills and guidance that learners have from teachers in the classroom context, and through the various technological materials offered in informal settings (Lai, 2015).

After discussing the definitions and complexities of the concept of learner autonomy, I shall now switch the discussion to the literature about learner autonomy in the specific context of this study. This includes exploring how learner autonomy is described in the LMD guide and in similar works to this research.

## **2.8. Learner autonomy as described in the LMD system guide**

The LMD system came with a vision for Algerian universities to be more like their counterparts in Europe. This vision involved underscoring the promotion of the autonomy of students as one of the main objectives of the LMD (MESRS, 2011). The implementation of this educational system meant "to offer students a freer space of autonomous learning under new pedagogical management" (Hanifi, 2018, p. 31). Nonetheless, the LMD guide presented by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research does not give many details about how and in what ways learner autonomy is to be promoted. In fact, the whole document contained a brief explanation of how autonomy in learning should be encouraged. It says:

“The autonomy of the students is based on the individual work as well as the resources and tools placed at their disposal. For this, teachers must:

1. Distribute references and bibliographic materials at the beginning of the semester.
2. Create course materials (handouts, online courses, etc.) which will allow and encourage students to work alone.
3. Open space as far as time allows for asking questions and debate.
4. Receiving individual students in educational counselling classes.

The construction of the methodology educational unit is crucial because its subject must be with a nature that promotes the autonomy of students” (MESRS, 2011, pp. 54-55)

“The methodology educational unit: The principle to remember is that these subjects will promote the autonomy of the student (some practical works, presentations, projects and end of study theses).” (MESRS, 2011, p. 46)

The LMD system guide clearly states that learner autonomy is based on the students’ individual work, which is undertaken outside the classroom. The LMD system’s explanation of what learner autonomy entails seems to revolve around inviting teachers to empower students through encouraging further research, both individually and in groups, to expand their knowledge and know how to educate themselves. It is about providing practice-based subjects and themes where students can make efforts outside the classroom and present their work to their teachers and peers. The LMD document also emphasises learner autonomy in the sense that students are free to ask questions, debate, and discuss ideas when time allows for it. Moreover, as indicated in the quote above, presentations and project work are encouraged and emphasised as tools for students to start depending on themselves in their



learning. In addition, the LMD system supports learner autonomy by providing counselling classes, which present an opportunity for students to ask for help from teachers when they face learning problems. Besides these complementary classes, students also have Methodology Units, which introduce and help students with their academic research skills. Such modules are notably important in enabling students to conduct academic assignments and final year projects.

Another point that should be clarified is that the LMD system is not solely addressing students in the department of English, but it is for all students enrolled in different departments and faculties in Algerian universities. Therefore, it cannot possibly be language learner autonomy that is concerned in this discourse, but rather autonomy in learning in general. However, even though language learner autonomy and learner autonomy seem to be based on the same principle of enabling learners to take charge of their learning, the implications and realisation of each type of autonomy take different approaches. Therefore, it is very important to note how and what type of autonomy in learning the LMD system preaches, as these ideas can mould students' learning behaviours because of the learning expectations laid out by the educational system.

All in all, autonomous learning in the LMD system does not seem to solely address language learning issues; it is about enabling students from all subjects and disciplines to assume more responsibility for what they study. The pedagogies and tools that were described in the LMD guide were more about enabling students to expand on what the teachers offer in the lessons being taught. All this with emphasis on both classroom context, where to ask questions and engage in debates, and beyond the classroom, where research is very much encouraged. Having discussed this, the coming section explores how learner autonomy is addressed in research taking place in the department of English at Algerian universities.

## **2.9. A critical review of learner autonomy research in the department of English in Algerian universities**

Research about learner autonomy has witnessed a growing interest, particularly after the implementation of the LMD system in the academic year 2004/2005. This section will present some conclusions after reviewing eight recent studies about learner autonomy that were carried out in the last five years. These studies have approached the notion of learner autonomy from multiple perspectives. For instance, Hadi (2018) investigated the readiness of

students for autonomous learning. While Senouci (2019) explored ways to promote learner autonomy, Missoum (2016), Lakehal (2021), and Arib and Maouche (2021) addressed learner autonomy in the department of English from cultural and sociocultural perspectives. The following table presents a list of the research reviewed with some details about the type of participants employed and the research tools used.

Table 3  
*The list of reviewed learner autonomy research in the last 5 years in Algeria*

Author	Research title	Participants	Research tools
Lakehal (2021)	Autonomy in Advanced Language Education: Considerations of the Socio-cultural Dimensions and their Impact on EFL Algerian Students' Learning Expectations and Attitudes	* 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students * Teachers	* Questionnaires * Focus group * Classroom observation
Arib and Maouche (2021)	Cultural Values and Readiness for Learner Autonomy in the Algerian Context: English as Foreign Language Teachers' Perspectives	* Teachers	* Questionnaire * Interviews
Fedj (2020)	Towards Enhancing EFL Learner Autonomy in the Algerian Secondary School (The Case of First and Second Year)	* Secondary school pupils	* Questionnaires * Interviews * Classroom observation
Maaz (2020)	Maaz, M. Teachers and Learners Attitudes Toward Project-Based Learning in Promoting Learners Autonomy: A Case Study of Master Two Students at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra.	*2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters Students *Teachers	*Questionnaires
Senouci (2019)	A tutoring course to enhance English language learning autonomy within the LMD system: Case of first year students at the department of English at Setif2 University	*1 <sup>st</sup> year students	*Classroom intervention
Hadi (2018)	Investigating Learner Autonomy among EFL Students and Teachers: Readiness and Concept Perception	*Mixed-student sample *Teachers	*Questionnaires *Interviews
Souilem (2018)	Autonomy in Language Learning: A Case Study of Third Year Licence Students of English at Adrar University	*1 <sup>st</sup> year students *Teachers	Questionnaires
Missoum (2016)	Learner Autonomy: Teachers and Learners' Attitudes and Perceptions	* Mixed-students sample * Teachers	Questionnaire

All the studies mentioned above were conducted in the context of higher education and addressed students in the department of English, which is also the case for the participants in this research, except for Fedj (2020) whose study was conducted at the secondary school level. In this section, I draw some critical observations about these studies, which can be outlined in the following four elements:

### **2.9.1. The quest for a correct definition of the concept “learner autonomy”**

The case that learner autonomy means different things in different contexts has been established in earlier phases of this study with sufficient evidence and rationale to justify the conduct of this research. However, investigations about learner autonomy in the Algerian context seem to ignore contextual variables that could potentially influence how individuals understand and interpret the concept of learner autonomy. This issue was also noted by Bendebiche (2022), who looked into the work of Hadi (2018). The latter said:

The research findings revealed that EFL teachers and students in Algerian university are not aware of the concept of learner autonomy. They are not able to either define it correctly nor provide an equivalence to it in the mother tongue.

(Hadi, 2018, p. 4)

Bendebiche (2022) elaborated on this by saying that Hadi (2018) implies the existence of one correct definition of learner autonomy, ignoring all the controversies around the different variables that influence how learner autonomy is viewed, defined, manifested, and practiced. It is Holec’s (1981) definition of learner autonomy as taking charge of all aspects of one’s own learning that makes the most correct definition for some researchers in the Algerian context. What was noted in the reviewed studies, like Hadi (2018) and Souilem (2018), is that often when students fail to give a scholarly definition of learner autonomy, they are by default considered as lacking awareness of what learner autonomy means. The presumption of having one correct definition of learner autonomy presents a positivist approach that completely overlooks any attempt to understand learner autonomy from the perspective of students. This also justified the overuse of questionnaires as a primary source of data, as in Missoum (2016) and Souilem (2018). Such questionnaires do not consider students’ views and lived experiences of learner autonomy. Rather, they limit students to a list of possible responses suggested by the researcher, and even when respondents are invited to express

their views about learner autonomy, researchers usually compare students' knowledge of the term autonomy with the scholarly definitions established in the literature, which they consider to be the most correct. In the end, this critique is not meant to undermine the value and usefulness of questionnaires. However, it is to challenge the rote research methods that do not offer as much complexity as needed when investigating a controversial concept such as learner autonomy. I have to say that I was guilty of this myself at the very beginning of this research. However, I soon started realising that a decentralising definition of learner autonomy requires investigations that listen to the participants views and consider them as valuable as those definitions given in the literature around the subject. The more I realized this, the more I was convinced of the necessity to interview my research participants and the need for rich qualitative data.

### **2.9.2. The focus on language learner autonomy**

The second observation that was made is about the heavy emphasis on the aspect of language learning (see table 3). Even though the research students-participants at university level in the reviewed works had discipline-based modules to study, the research about learner autonomy as presented by the reviewed works mostly highlights autonomous language learning, which is more or less a prerequisite in the department of English. This is often based on the presumption that students who are based in the department of English are there mainly to develop their language skills, which is not the case given the fact that the same students are also expected to develop specialised content knowledge in a context where English is a means of communication. In that regard, Chetouane (2022) mentioned that "the immediate problem that rises when addressing this issue -investigations of learner autonomy- is the sheer amount of academics who consider students at the department of English as mainly language learners" (p. 214). Having made that clear, a grey area of academic content and learner autonomy is left without sufficient literature. Not taking into account the academic content knowledge of students is further confirmed when the examined studies appear to acknowledge the differences in modules that students have, yet they employ understandings of learner autonomy that were mainly founded in language learner autonomy contexts. For instance, all the reviewed research was informed directly or indirectly by Holec's (1981) definition of language learner autonomy (see Section 2.2.2), in which Holec suggests that autonomous learners should be able to make decisions about defining their learning

objectives, the content they study, the materials they use, and the evaluation techniques. This exact definition is adopted by Maaz (2020), who asks her participants -masters students specialised in the domain of Applied Linguistics- the question, "Which of the following decisions do you think you are capable of taking in the classroom?" and then gives them a list of choices inspired by Holec's definition of language learner autonomy.

- Choose the materials to use in the English classroom
- Decide the objective of the course
- Decide the time to spend on each activity
- Evaluate the learning performance

Firstly, Holec's view of learner autonomy is not addressed in formal contexts, and it was primarily founded in adult education (Holmes, 2018), so it clearly cannot be adopted in a formal classroom context without any contextual considerations. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Holec's view of learner autonomy simply concerns language learning goals; this is a learning/teaching domain that has its own specifications. Evidently, Holec's view of learner autonomy does not seem to properly reflect the context in which these studies and the current research took place. In other words, understandings of learner autonomy as founded in language learner autonomy literature do not seem compatible with a formal context with multiple non-language learning and teaching objectives. To clarify this further, when Holec's language learner autonomy definition was projected on the research students in Hadi (2018), it was noted that "selecting activities and setting examples would be easier - for students- in some modules (subjects) such grammar (which is a language learning module) and hard in other modules such as linguistics and literature" (p. 123). This is a viable example of the need to identify students' learning objectives before endorsing a language learner autonomy investigation in a context where language learning may not necessarily be the students' main concern.

In the end, highlighting the different learning objectives that students have in the department of English in Algerian universities can also lead to questioning the validity of the term EFL (English as a foreign language). The latter is often attributed to students in all the reviewed research (Missoum, 2018; Senouci, 2019) and sometimes the term "language classroom" is used like in Maaz (2020) where the study participants are master's students specialised in the

domain of Applied Linguistics. Nonetheless, the academic content taught is made completely irrelevant by referring to students as merely language learners. This remark is particularly important because the term EFL may be useful when referring to English language learning responsibilities that students undertake. However, it cannot be stretched to indicate the academic content for students in modules like Civilization and Literature, especially when in such modules English is mostly considered a means of communication rather than an end goal per se.

### **2.9.3. The focus on classroom learner autonomy**

Another observation that was made after reviewing the aforementioned studies is that they mostly focused on the classroom context. Giving exclusive attention to the classroom environment risks producing a short-sighted view of the concept of learner autonomy. Perhaps this justifies the use of classroom observations as a research tool in learner autonomy investigations, as in Lakehal (2021) and Fedj (2020). Such investigations often reveal that students are passive and reluctant to participate in the lesson, not being able to take control of their learning and hence not being autonomous, especially since autonomy is associated with active and participative contributions to the lesson inside the classroom. What should be noted in such studies is that students may not be autonomous in the way Holec describes it in his definition, and this for several obvious reasons of which we can mention: shyness, stress, lack of confidence, and lack of knowledge about the topic discussed. However, this does not mean that students are not autonomous in their learning as a whole. In addition, the essence of learning has never been about being active in the classroom. In this regard, Candy (1988) 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). This process of learning does not necessarily happen inside the classroom; it can also occur outside the classroom context, where students spend most of their time.

In a more recent work, Bendebiche (2022) gave the same criticism about learner autonomy studies undertaken in the Algerian context, he said that "Another issue is that the focus is on autonomous behaviours inside the classroom while neglecting what happens outside the school premise in the vast world beyond the classroom" (p. 68). This observation is not meant to undermine the importance of classroom learner autonomy. However, it draws attention to the need to consider students' autonomy as an inclusive process taking place both within and

beyond classroom settings, which is what the current research aims to do. Such research endeavours should help in presenting a more wholesome view of the concept of learner autonomy in which potential connections between the two learning contexts are identified, explained, and purposefully used in promoting more contextually considered autonomous learning endeavours.

#### **2.9.4. The assumption that Algerian culture inhibits autonomy**

There is a great consensus in learner autonomy literature in the Algerian context about students lacking motivation, being passive, and not yet ready to assume learning responsibilities and take charge of their own learning (Arib and Maouche, 2021; Lakehal, 2021; Hadi, 2018). In such a context, it is often assumed that the north-African, Arabo-Amazigh-Islamic Algerian culture is the reason -if not the main one- that inhibits individuals, or in many cases, students, from being autonomous. To understand this argument, one should break it down into how it first started and why it was established in the first place. To do this, I first refer to the work of Sonaiya (2002), which forms the backbone of the argument that says learner autonomy is not suitable for African settings because of certain beliefs and attitudes that are not very far from those found in Asian contexts. The same argument is often used in the Algerian context. For instance, Benaissi (2015) draws on this by saying that just like their Asian counterparts, Algerian individuals progress in the culture of group (collectivism). As learners, Algerians consider the teacher figure necessary for learning, they heavily rely on classroom input; and they discuss study and career decisions with friends and family. In a more recent study, Fedj (2020) used Sonaiya's argument about the unsuitability of learner autonomy in the African context (including Algeria). What such research fails to mention is that in a later review, Sonaiya (2005) appears to subscribe to a revised position that recognises that the role of ethnic culture as a constraint to autonomy to be less important than that of professional, institutional, or organisational culture (as cited in Kuchah and Smith, 2011). This takes us back to the discussion about culture in Section 2.1, where I highlight the dangers of associating autonomy with ethnic or national culture and why such forms of conceptualising culture would imply less generalisability for autonomy, which is a basic human need that transcends the notions of race, nationality, and geography (Chirkov, 2009; Palfreyman, 2003).

In the end, although a handful of studies have been conducted about learner autonomy in Algeria, they surely contributed to enriching the literature around the subject and revealing how Algerian academics perceive and investigate the notion of learner autonomy. The reviewed studies have greatly informed and shaped the current research by identifying gaps that previous research did not cover. These gaps further stressed the need for understanding the complexities of the learning context before promoting learner autonomy or judging students as autonomous or not. Having explained this, the following section will present a brief summary to conclude all that has been discussed in this chapter.

### **2.10. Conclusion**

It has been the purpose of this chapter to explore the complexities of the concept of learner autonomy, which involves investigations about its origins, the concepts it is confused with, its versions, dimensions, and models, and its connectedness to culture and to the research setting under which this study is carried out. However, before all, the chapter puts forward the need to differentiate between autonomy in language learning and autonomy in other domains where learners have discipline-based knowledge to learn. Reviewing the literature about learner autonomy also confirmed the multidimensionality and the cultural and contextual implications of where the concept is employed. Therefore, the need for thorough contextual investigations such as this research was raised, and the contemporaneity of this topic was assured.

The final elements in the literature involved consulting recent works about learner autonomy in similar contexts to this research. Such works demonstrated that there is an emphasis on finding a correct definition of learner autonomy, restricting research to the domain of language learning, focusing on the classroom context, and making assumptions that Algerian culture inhibits learner autonomy. Such a review of works also helped identify the gap in the literature about learner autonomy that needs to be filled. First, there is a need to differentiate between learner autonomy in language learning and autonomy learning non-language subjects. This is the case in this research context, where students learn the English language and particular academic content. Also, the need to view learner autonomy from a holistic point of view, in other words, within and outside the classroom, learner autonomy should be jointly considered. Finally, reviewing the literature helped broaden my understanding of the concept of learner autonomy and reinforced the idea that this research advocates the need



to consider the already existing autonomous practices of Algerian students in the department of English. In the end, the importance of the literature chapter can be extended to the methodological framework of this research, which the literature helped mapping. The next chapter presents the rationale for the methodological framework under which the data of this research were collected and analysed.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the rationale for all methodological decisions made in this research. In the beginning of this chapter, I discuss my research philosophy, in which I describe the research paradigm used, the approach of research, and my positionality as a researcher in this work. The research philosophy is the backbone of the study, and it inevitably affects my views about how data are collected, analysed, and finally translated into findings. In the second section, I present the rationale for the selection of a comparative case study design and how it informs the research. The same section discusses the data collection instruments and the piloting phase on which the final study was based. After that, I discuss the sampling criteria and present the study samples at the two research sites. In this chapter, I also present data collection and analysis procedures that explain how different sources of data are used to answer the research questions. This section also illustrates the analytical procedures taken to transform raw data into informative findings. Before ending this chapter by discussing the ethical considerations and the research limitations, I briefly illustrate the methodological changes and the implications caused by COVID-19, under which the study was conducted.

### 3.2. Research Philosophy

It is important for a researcher to be familiar with the research lore and learn from previous experiences in the journey of making knowledge. Dörnyei (2007) says, “research is not done for its own sake, but to generate knowledge and to further our understanding” (p. 18). Therefore, the researcher holds the responsibility of generating knowledge, which makes it impulsive for him/her to illustrate the research philosophy adopted. In this chapter, I shall present the research paradigm of this study and the rationale behind it.

To carefully draft the methodological design of this study, it is important to situate my philosophical assumptions along with those of other researchers in academia. These assumptions should be made aware of before the conduct of any research to give orientation to the research and knowledge presented. Prasad (2005) referred to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) description of the term paradigm for those orientations that designate a shared set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that unite a community of scholars and prescribe specific guidelines for conducting research. A paradigm is also defined as "a way of

looking at research or researching phenomena, a world view, or a view of what counts as accepted or correct scientific knowledge" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 5). Before discussing any paradigms, attention will be given to two major philosophies that should be understood to help in planning and carrying out any research. These philosophies are "ontology" and "epistemology". Ontology raises the issue of beliefs about whether reality is independent of human understanding and interpretations, or it is common, shared, socially constructed, and culture-specific (Snape & Spencer, 2003). As for epistemology, it deals with the nature of knowledge (i.e., what is considered accepted knowledge) and the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. In this study, I will use a revised and contemporary way of theorising suggested by Cunliffe (2011) in which she presents three major problematics from which knowledge construction can be viewed. These three problematics can also be considered paradigms since they involve the ontological and epistemological philosophies in generating knowledge. Cunliffe (2011) first suggests the objectivist problematic, which is akin to the positivist view of knowledge as a distant objective to be explored. Secondly, the subjectivist problematic consists of the individual's experience in a socially and culturally mediated context. Lastly, Cunliffe presents the inter-subjective problematic in which meaning is constructed jointly among individuals, which mirrors constructivist views of knowledge. The last paradigm also stresses the extensive role of the researcher in meaning-making. My ontological and epistemological beliefs in this study fall within the inter-subjectivist problematic by Cunliffe (2011), which will be explained in detail in the next section.

### **3.2.1. The problematic of inter-subjectivity**

From an inter-subjectivist point of view, reality is a "commonly experienced and understood world of shared meanings" (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 657). On that account, one might say that a phenomenon could be interpreted in a given context differently depending on individuals' shared circumstances and experiences. In this regard, Cunliffe (2011) suggests that "intersubjectivity lies at the boundaries of subjectivism and inter-subjectivism because the focus often lies on subject interpretations theorised by researchers using "outside" academic constructs." (p. 657). In accordance with these philosophical beliefs, both the subjectivist and the intersubjectivity stances appear in the research, which is done by exploring several individual understandings and interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy and then

highlighting a consensus of views that makes a co-constructed understanding of learner autonomy.

Within the inter-subjective paradigm, Cunliffe (2011) indicates that social constructivism is placed at the core. The multiple interpretations and reflections of participants are the focus of the researcher; hence, the participants' perspectives and points of view are the main ingredients on which social reality is constructed. The social aspect of this research fits within my beliefs about knowledge-making, and this would largely inform the inter-subjective paradigm, which is based on socially constructed reality as entailed by Cunliffe (2011). Having said that, I shall add that I share a constructivist view with researchers like Denzin and Lincoln (2011). These researchers also believe that research is not to comprehend the essence of the real world but the richness of a world that is socially determined. This is also a reminder that my work as a researcher is not to declare that the findings of my study are the ultimate truth, but to push the span of knowledge a little further and extend the epistemological dimensions of views that proved to be shared among a community of practice in a given time and space.

The paradigm illustrated above also informs the methodological framework of the research. Social constructivism shares a qualitative research approach with interpretivism that entails using data collection instruments like interviews and observations (Lauckner et al., 2012). Such research tools provide detailed, rich, and reflective data that mirrors the participants' social realities. Moreover, findings in such research are not only the interpretations of the study participants and the researcher, but the phenomenon and society strongly influence those interpretations as well. At the same time, the idea of social constructivism is built on individuals in the same context shaping their own reality. Therefore, it becomes necessary to have as many individual opinions as possible to be able to give an overall understanding based on active elements of the studied society. Such reasoning implied the use of a research instrument like questionnaires, which is a methodological choice validated by Romm (2013) when he stated that "questionnaires themselves could be used in a project with reference to a qualitative-constructivist outlook" (p. 656). The use of questionnaires here is not to obtain significant statistical generalizability, and non is claimed. However, it is to better understand the research phenomena by investigating as many established views as possible about the research issue.

At this stage, it would be logical to argue that the inductive nature of the research that interviews present is challenged by the deductive stance that questionnaires as a quantitative research instrument bring. Such a mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches to reasoning describes an abductive approach, which is illustrated in the following section.

### **3.2.2. An abductive approach of research**

In general, there are two types of reasoning to conduct research: a deductive approach (top-down), which is about relying on what has been done in the area of research and testing hypotheses. The second approach is induction, or bottom-up, and it is about generating new theoretical insights from socially constructed knowledge. In other words, the researcher needs to be data-driven all the way through the research. In the case of this study, both types of reasoning are employed. This means that I acknowledge the benefits of relying on empirical analysis to understand the meaning of learner autonomy. However, one should also understand that when investigating a notion like learner autonomy, it is impossible to escape the overall conceptual layout of this concept. For instance, autonomy cannot be easily translated into the participants' mother tongue, and it does not have clear-cut synonyms. In such a situation, Holec's classical definition of "taking charge of one's own learning" is employed. This definition seems the best way to bring the general idea of autonomy to students' minds so they can reflect on it, explain it, and elaborate on how they see themselves as autonomous learners. In other words, the conceptual framework of this study relies on existing research. However, ontologies and epistemologies of learner autonomy as lived and experienced by the study participants are not based on their alignment with learner autonomy models, which are developed in different contexts with different socio-cultural and socio-educational backgrounds. Eventually, floating between the two inductive and deductive reasonings presents a hybrid approach for research known as abduction.

Thornberg (2012) describes abduction as going beyond the data as well as the pre-existing theories. He also referred to the abductive approach as innovative and insightful since it results in "modifying and elaborating prior knowledge or putting old ideas together in new ways as the researcher explores and tries to explain the new data" (p. 5). This approach to reasoning is clearly reflected in the methodological choices of this research, which entail, first, the use of questionnaires that reflect the participants' views about pre-existing understandings of the investigated concept. At the same time, employing interviews to

develop in-depth and contextualised understandings of the notion of learner autonomy. In the end, abduction is further supported by Ketokivi and Choi (2014), who stated that "in case research, abductive reasoning involves modifying the logic of the general theory in order to reconcile it with contextual idiosyncrasies" (p. 236). This eventually serves the purpose of this study, which is to highlight other varieties of the notion of learner autonomy that reflect the context in which the concept is employed.

Having discussed the different types of reasoning employed and how they inform the methodological choices of this research, I shall now move to discussing my positionality as the researcher and the author of this work.

### **3.2.2. Researcher positionality**

The positionality of a researcher in a study is illustrated by Throne (2012) as "the researcher's reflection of one's own place within the many contexts and subjectivities of the viewpoint" (p. 56). This entails all the possible points that connect researchers to their participants, the research environment, the research setting, and the research context in general.

Most of the time, positionality in research is identified in a dichotomic model of insider/outsider to the research. In my case, I was not always a PhD student/researcher in a foreign country. It was only some years ago that I was a student at an Algerian university. My Algerianness and my experience at university not only informed me about the complexities of the notion of learner autonomy in the Algerian context, but also motivated me to conduct this investigation. This presented some advantages, which were articulated by Mannay (2010), who said, "Working on familiar territory can elicit greater understanding because cultural and linguistic barriers do not have to be negotiated" (p. 93). What Mannay (2010) suggested corresponds to what Narayan (1993) advised in his work, which is to encourage native anthropologists to melt down the wall between insider/outsider researcher identities. He said, "It is more profitable to focus on shifting identities in relationship with the people and issues an anthropologist seeks to represent." (p. 654). Eventually, I was convinced of the usefulness of this approach, and I employed it when interacting with my research participants.

Following Mannay's (2010) approach, my closeness to the research participants (students) was not only due to the fact that we were from approximately the same cultural and ethnic background, and we only had a 6-year age gap or less. However, during the interview, it also

appeared to me that we had very similar childhood and language learning experiences. For instance, when talking about their English language experiences, students mentioned movies and TV shows that I used to watch too (see Appendix 11). Expressing these shared experiences helped the participants become more at ease with me, which broke that participant-researcher psychological barrier. In many other instances, the participants (students and teachers) spoke to me with complete familiarity with the situation in the country, city, and university. For example, several participants told me, "You have seen how the library is..." Then they spoke about the lack of technological tools and resources that could help them have a better learning experience. Indeed, this was reassuring about how comfortable and open the participants are with me. However, it also alerted me to the fact that if they see me as an insider, they will start assuming that I am fully aware of what they are talking about, hence they may not feel the need to explain themselves in full detail. To address this issue, I again worked by Mannay's (2010) advice about making the familiar strange to demolish the inherited constraints of the context of the research by deliberately questioning my "taken for granted perceptions" (p. 94). I did this by asking follow-up questions and drawing illustrations from the participants to avoid any assumptions they might have and to prevent them from explaining themselves and not providing data that could potentially be valuable to the research.

My positionality in this research as an insider/outsider is also encouraged by the intersubjective stance of the knowledge construct. I am one of the advocates of the social construct of reality and knowledge in social research (Friedman, 2016; Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018). This theoretical approach that was formulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1967 allows me to adopt an interpretivist stance that seeks to develop an objective science to study based on the participants' lived experiences (Andrews, 2012). Moreover, I believe that the experience I gained through my readings about the notion of learner autonomy and the research methods sessions I attended, along with my supervisors' advice, helped me to always think in a non-judgmental way until enough insights are provided and not to limit myself with assumptions to look up proving. In addition, the research was made according to the criteria of reliability and trustworthiness inspired by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are reported in later sections of this chapter (see Section 3.8).

At the same time, I was convinced that research is never fully objective. The identity of the researcher and their professional/personal relatedness to the research as the craftsman of the project have an inevitable impact on how findings are moulded, and conclusions are drawn. In that regard, in the case of this research, I might share the same opinions and experiences as some participants. Some of which made rationale for the undertaking of this research. For instance, I am one of the firm believers that autonomy is a human capacity and that everyone is autonomous to a certain degree, in certain ways, and under certain circumstances. However, even with this conviction, I needed to look with critical eyes, keep an open mind, and carefully scrutinise and report the intended meanings that the participants gave, especially since not every reported act of learning is by default autonomous. In the end, I do refuse to question the integrity of my participants responses simply because they had no reason to fabricate facts or exaggerate the experiences that they shared with me. Nonetheless, I also cannot completely turn my eyes away from all the experiences, status, and other baggage that I brought with me as an outsider. Hence, even if this baggage did not influence the conversations I had with the participants, it surely influenced us all as students, teachers, and individuals with many commonalities. Finally, acknowledging the bidirectional impact that I had with my participants would also help in making a rigorous and all-encompassing study where the researchers' positionality is recognised as one of the complexities of the research.

### **3.3. Research design**

This section presents illustrations for all methodological procedures and decisions, like why both qualitative and quantitative data are collected, why a comparative case study is used, why semi-structured interviews and questionnaires are regarded as the best options, and what methodological changes occurred in this research. However, before exploring any of that, I shall refer to Berg (2004), who argues that drafting the research design is determined by the research objectives and questions, which hold the values of the investigation. Therefore. All research tools and approaches in this study were carefully employed to reach the delineated research objectives, which can be put into three main points. First, understanding how the concept of learner autonomy is understood and interpreted by students and teachers. Secondly, identifying practices and characteristics attributed to



autonomous learners in the context of this study. Finally, identifying the factors that influence students' autonomous learning practices, understandings, and interpretations of the concept

The objectives of the research require in-depth investigations and contextual details. The need for details, personal experiences, and individualised views called for a case study design, which Yin (2014) describes as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Yin (2014) argues that choice largely depends on the research questions and that "the more your research questions seek to explain some present circumstance, e.g., how or why some social phenomenon works, the more that case study research will be relevant" (p. 4). Therefore, case studies are a common choice when investigating factors influencing learner autonomy, as in Kemala (2016) and Harunori and Derek (2013). However, despite the suitability of the case study in this research and the convincing evidence of its usefulness provided by previous research, it does not come without flaws. In response to that, the internal validity and trustworthiness of the case study research are covered in later parts of this chapter (see Section 3.8).

### **3.3.1. Comparative case study design**

Having decided that case study design is the most appropriate research approach also entails deciding what type of case study to employ. Baxter and Jack (2008) categorised case studies into three types: single cases, single cases with multiple units, and multiple case studies. The type of case study is determined by the issue investigated and the research questions asked. Nonetheless, in several situations, multiple case study research was referred to as the most preferable (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gerring, 2007; Rowley, 2002), and this is because of the numerous advantages that it offers. These advantages can be summarised in the fact that it creates a more convincing theory, especially when the suggestions are more intensely grounded in several empirical pieces of evidence, and it allows the use of a variety of data collection tools. Moreover, evidence drawn from multiple case studies can be measured strongly and reliably. Another rationale for choosing a multiple case study design is that the study in hands takes place in two different contexts, and this is one of the characteristics of multiple-case studies that Yin (2014) referred to as enabling the researcher to explore differences within and between cases.

Goodrick (2014) describes comparative case studies as "involving the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a common

focus or goal" (p. 1). This reflects the procedures that are intended to be taken in this research since it takes place in two different settings but examines the same phenomenon. In sum, the choice of a comparative multiple-case study informs my research in understanding and explaining how context influences a phenomenon (Goodrick, 2014). This perfectly goes in line with the issue that this study tackles, which is the context-related factors that influence students' autonomous learning. All these advantages reassure the proper methodological selections of this research, thereby granting it more credibility and validity. However, before moving on to describe the data collection instruments, I should acknowledge my flexible approach on several occasions when methodological changes were made to accommodate the changes that occurred in the topic investigated and the challenges faced when collecting data. These changes are mentioned in the following section when describing the data collection instruments and process, but they are further elaborated in the methodological changes section 3.6 in this chapter.

### **3.3.2. Description of the data collection instruments**

The study uses a mixed-methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected. The first research instrument used was questionnaires, which were distributed to students and teachers. Questionnaires were employed to collect demographic and quantitative data about the participants. At the same time, the questionnaires informed the research about students' familiarity with the concept of learner autonomy and addressed learning practices that the participants could potentially see as an act of autonomous learning. This research instrument also allowed me to approach volunteers for the semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth investigations of the topic addressed.

The use of different data collection instruments allowed triangulation, which, according to Eisner (2017), allows "a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility" (p. 110). The research instruments and the purposes behind using them are described in the following section according to the order of their use in the phase of data collection.

#### ***a. Questionnaires***

At first glance, questionnaires may not seem like the best choice to make, especially since I framed my epistemological and ontological beliefs in a social-constructivist paradigm, which necessitates a high level of subjectivity and an in-depth understanding of the issue investigated. However, the idea of social constructivism itself is built on individuals in the

same context shaping their own reality; hence, it becomes necessary to have as many individual opinions as possible from active elements of the studied society. This methodological choice is validated by Romm (2013), who stated that "questionnaires themselves could be used in a project with reference to a qualitative-constructivist outlook" (p. 656). The role of questionnaires in qualitative research is articulated in Brannen (2005), who indicated that questionnaires provide contextual information about the population study. Therefore, questionnaires in this research served as a complementary research instrument, providing demographic and contextual data about the case study. In addition, the questionnaires supported the research by provoking insights about learner autonomy. Moreover, such a research instrument helped in covering all first-year master's students in both universities, which helped in defining the case study and its boundaries (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

Students' and teachers' responses to the questionnaires eventually helped in developing the interview questions. For instance, students demonstrated a high level of agreement on some learner-autonomy-related activities while they could not relate to others. Such findings were worth investigating in depth in the interviews. Moreover, the findings from the questionnaires, which aligned with those from the interviewee sample, also provided some generalizability, at least for all first-year master's students and their teachers in the department of English at the concerned universities. In the end, both students and teachers' questionnaires are addressed in the coming two sections, where I elaborate on the purpose of each questionnaire, the areas it focuses on, and the items included.

Firstly, the questionnaire addressed to students consisted of a background section and two main parts. In the background section, students give some demographic information that helps establish a profile for them. The first main part of the questionnaire addresses the students' perceived level of the English language, their perception of the concept of success in learning, their learning objectives, and their familiarity with the concept of learner autonomy. The second main part of the questionnaire includes two tables and a section for three open-ended questions. Firstly, because autonomous students are responsible by definition (Scharle & Szabó, 2000), it would be beneficial to investigate what responsibilities students assume in the classroom context. For that reason, the first table in the questionnaire comprises five items about the responsibilities that the participants assume inside the

classroom, as inspired by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The second table consists of 37 Likert scale items inspired by different works in the literature about language learner autonomy in the Algerian context and beyond that, like Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Benson (2013), Hadi (2018), and Pichugova et al. (2016). In these works, there are different suggestions for language learner autonomy practices that the participants of this study could also identify with. The aim of this section was to see how well students' responses would fit with language learner autonomy practices, which often are deemed effective in learning foreign languages. The last part of the questionnaire gave students a chance to freely express themselves about the learning practices that enabled them to develop their language inside and outside the classroom. A copy of the students' questionnaire is available in **Appendix one**.

Like the questionnaire addressed to students, the teachers' questionnaire also had a background section that helped establish a profile of the teachers. The first part of the questionnaire seeks to illustrate what teachers mean by the concept of learner autonomy. The same section investigates what success in learning means to them in their learning context. The second part of the questionnaire holds the same tables as the students' questionnaire. The first holds items about responsibilities that teachers think students should have inside the classroom (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). The second table is similar to the one addressed to students. However, in this case, it investigates practices that teachers associate with autonomy in language learning. Having similar items in students' and teachers' questionnaires enables a comparison between what students do and what their teachers think their students should do in autonomous language learning. Teachers' responses about what they think of autonomous language learning are supported by open-ended questions where teachers can freely reflect on their opinions. This is followed by questions about how teachers can help students become more autonomous in learning the English language within and beyond the classroom context. A copy of the teachers' questionnaires is available in **Appendix two**.

### ***b. Semi-structured interviews***

Interviews are a widespread instrument used to collect verbal data in the realm of qualitative research, including case studies. They are topic-oriented, two-way discussions. Semi-structured interviews are regarded as a combination of structured questionnaires and unstructured talk, which is an appropriate choice in terms of saving time when the researcher

uses predetermined but open-ended questions. This offers a compromise between being prepared with a set of questions and being ready and open to creating other questions for further elaborations on any evolving issues when necessary. Dörnyei (2007). Although social constructivists often use focus groups to give more chances for more participants to interact and have an impact on creating knowledge (Rodriguez et al., 2011), in this case, individual interviews were conducted for convenience purposes, which are to give equal importance to all opinions. Moreover, focus groups would have been informative if the research interest had been to monitor how participants interact with one another, which is not the case in this study. In this research, semi-structured interviews give two options. If participants in a single case study share, to some extent, the same views about learner autonomy, this would enable a representative understanding of the investigated notion. However, if students have different interpretations of learner autonomy, then more importance will be given to individual differences. This would lead the researcher to narrow the findings to several representations of understandings to be used in comparing the two case studies in a later stage of the research.

The semi-structured interviews in this research are the main data collection tool, and they aim to run an in-depth investigation about how students interpret the concept of learner autonomy in their learning context, how they characterise autonomous learners, and what factors they think influence their autonomous learning behaviour. In semi-structured interviews, the researchers use a set of main probing and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This allows the interviewees to express themselves freely and thoughtfully about their experiences. My role as a researcher here was also to follow up on the interviewees' answers by asking for more illustrations and sometimes examples when needed. The students' interview guidelines can be summarised as follows:

The first part of the students' interviews was to introduce myself and explain my research purposes to the participant. The second part of the interview was to get to know the participants and make them feel at ease. The main interview questions were divided into two rubrics. The first is to elicit information about how students interpret the concepts of learner autonomy in general and in their learning context. This section further investigated how students interpret the concepts of responsibility and independence in learning, at the same time. The rationale behind this decision was that these concepts are closest in meaning to

learner autonomy because autonomous learners are responsible (Scharle & Szabó, 2000) and have a sense of independence towards their learning (Little, 1991). The second rubric consisted of questions about personal, institutional, sociocultural, and socio-economic variables that might have an impact on students' autonomous learning and their understanding of the concept. The same rubric also consisted of questions that aimed to identify and illustrate other potential factors that were not addressed in the earlier sections. A copy of the students' interview guide is in **Appendix three**.

Teachers are an important part of the educational context for students, where learner autonomy is enacted. Therefore, consulting their opinions makes a valuable addition to the research. The teachers' interviews serve the same function as those of students when it comes to providing in-depth investigations and personal interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy. Teachers' interviews also provide descriptions of the characteristics attributed to autonomous learners and the factors that teachers think influence their students' autonomous learning. The interview's guide for teachers initially asks about the participants' experience in teaching, the classes, the levels they teach, and the teaching training they have. The first section of the interview investigates what learner autonomy means to teachers in the department of English. Teachers were also asked how they characterise autonomous learners, and what independence and responsibility in learning mean to them. The interview guide also consists of questions about their classroom practices, which they think are helpful in developing students' autonomy in language learning/in the academic content they teach. Moreover, teachers were also asked about the contextual factors that they thought had an influence on their students' autonomous learning. As for the last section of the interview, it involves questions about the teachers' perception of their roles in promoting learner autonomy, which also helps in interpreting their understanding of the concept. A copy of the interview guide for teachers is available in **Appendix four**.

### ***c. Students' follow-up interviews***

One of the issues that I faced in this research was whether students were familiar with the word autonomy or not because English is a foreign language to them and there is no accurate translation for the term autonomy in their mother tongue. First, I decided to address the students in the interviews using the concepts of responsibility, independence in learning, as the rationale behind this decision was that these concepts are the closest in meaning to what

the word autonomy in general means. The terms "responsibility and independence" were also used by Elmahjoub and Lamb (2019) in a similar situation when investigating the meaning of the concept of learner autonomy in a Libyan context. Although this approach to investigating learner autonomy sounded right at the time, when examining the initial answers of case (1), the students' data seemed very redundant. Moreover, the concepts of responsibility and independence that were investigated naturally emerged from the teachers' interviewees. The preliminary findings of the interviews alerted me to the possibility of students giving me more engaging themes if they were asked directly about the concept of learner autonomy instead of using independence and responsibility in learning as proxy concepts. This was a solid reason for me to conduct follow-up interviews in which I asked the students about learner autonomy, then resort to the general definition of learner autonomy by Holec (1981), "taking charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), and to the concepts of independence and responsibility if students are not familiar with learner autonomy in the first place.

The follow-up interviews consisted of eight questions that mainly covered three topics which are, first, students' familiarity with the notion of learner autonomy. Secondly, whether students consider themselves autonomous or not and to what extent Thirdly, the meaning of the concept of learner autonomy for students within/beyond the classroom context. Questions that students were asked were extended with some follow-up questions depending on their responses, in which I aimed to elicit any potential factors that might have an impact on students' autonomous learning, or their understanding of the concept investigated. After asking students directly about the concept of learner autonomy, their findings differed from the first time when they were asked about values related to the concept. Students' answers were more to the point, contextualised, and addressed the research questions rather than the speculation I made in the first attempt of the interview.

By the time I decided to include follow-up interviews, I still had not collected data from the second case study. Therefore, the follow-up interviews were only for the participants of case (1). Follow-up interview questions were simply added to the main interview guide for the second case study. A copy of the follow-up interview guide for students is available in **Appendix Five**.

### **3.3.3. Piloting data collection instruments**

Conducting a pilot study is one of the important phases in the process of conducting research. Piloting has many advantages that would help in the conduct of the main study, like determining the feasibility of the study, testing the reliability and validity of the research instruments, and familiarising the researcher with the procedures and protocols to be carried out while collecting the data. Moreover, piloting gives an idea about final data entry and analysis, which makes the researcher prepared and efficient in processing the data after collecting them. Furthermore, it gives some valuable insights to future researchers about what to anticipate and avoid in similar studies, or at least similar methodologies. Finally, no matter how well-planned research is, a pilot phase is always important for the thorough and efficient conduct of research. In the current study, both data collection instruments (questionnaires and interviews) were piloted, as explained in the sub-sections below.

#### ***a. Piloting students' and teachers' questionnaire***

After designing the questionnaires and before sending them to the designated sample, they underwent several changes based on feedback from the piloting participants, critical research peers, and my supervisors. Students' questionnaires were piloted with a group of eight students who were contacted via different social media platforms, namely Facebook, email, and Viber. Feedback from the piloting stage helped identify questions that the students perceived as unclear or broad. First, students raised the concern that the questionnaire was too long. Therefore, I eliminated some items about the backgrounds of students since they were not relevant to the core issue addressed in the research. The initial questionnaire also had items asking about what responsibility in learning, independence in learning, and successful learning mean to students. In this regard, students' feedback reminded me that such questions were better asked in the interviews, where they could verbally express their opinions about the addressed concepts. Moreover, the pilot participants suggested that I specify the context, whether it is within or outside the classroom, when asking the questions. Students' feedback helped me adjust the questionnaire to be clearer and more straightforward to avoid any misunderstandings or comprehension problems for the main study participants.

In the end, although the results from the pilot study were subject to the limited number of participants, they helped organise the final draft of the questionnaires. Having discussed the



questionnaire piloting, I shall present in the next section the piloting of the semi-structured interviews.

### ***b. Piloting students' and teachers' semi-structured interviews***

Although the interview questions for students and teachers were discussed with my supervisors, they still needed to be piloted. Because of access difficulties, the interview questions were piloted by one student and one teacher. Nonetheless, the outcomes of the pilot study were particularly useful. First, piloting helped me familiarise myself with the interview procedures (giving out the consent information sheet, collecting the consent sheet, setting the audio recorder, etc.). The pilot interviews also helped me roughly estimate the time that the participants might take, which was ideally about an hour. But more importantly, piloting led to the re-construction of some interview questions, which were made clearer and more to the point. The students' and teachers' suggestions about the interviews' questions were also considered. The student-interviewee suggested giving more details about the research topic because of his unfamiliarity with the term "learner autonomy". This incident made me anticipate having students in the main study who may not be familiar with the term "learner autonomy" (which caused me to use the proxy terms responsibility and independence as indicated in earlier sections). As for teachers, they suggested reformulating some questions to keep the issue under investigation in focus.

In the end, the piloting phase resulted in a more refined and organised interview guide, which helped immensely in the conduct of the main study. With the data collection and piloting instruments explained, I shall shift attention to the selection criteria of the universities where the research was conducted.

### **3.3.4. Description of the research participants and the sampling criteria**

This research was conducted in the departments of English at two Algerian universities because of recent claims about having students who are not autonomous or lack autonomy in this context (Ghout-Khenoune, 2015; Missoum, 2016; Senouci, 2019). This research challenges those claims. Therefore, the samples recruited were from the same context where those claims were raised. Having explained and identified the general area of sampling, this research particularly targeted first-year master's degree students for the following reasons: First, master's students have successfully passed the first cycle of Algerian higher education

(licence) that is part of the current educational system, LMD. This achievement is potentially an indicator that a certain degree of autonomy should have developed since it is one of the LMD objectives to produce autonomous learners (MESRS, 2011). Therefore, such a sample increases the chances of getting data about learner autonomy from students who are more likely to have achieved a degree of autonomy in their learning. Moreover, this is also a reminder that this research is not to judge students as autonomous or not, but to understand what this concept means in a particular educational context. Secondly, master's degree students can reflect on their experience of autonomy in learning at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels, which potentially leads to richness in data. Finally, master's degrees in Algeria are full-time, and they are taught-based courses, which makes it easy for the researcher to recruit enough participants. Teachers are also included in this research for their influential and integral role in students' education. For such reasons, their views are of paramount importance. All teachers in this research were based in the department of English, so they could reflect on their students' autonomous behaviours and what they considered acts of autonomy.

Because of the small number of master's students in the department of English, the aim of the study was to distribute the questionnaires to all first-year master's students and their teachers in the department of English at both universities. As for the interviewees, they are sampled from the questionnaire sample. The interviewees' sample number was inspired by Guest et al. (2006), who suggested that "when the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals (of the same case study), twelve interviews should suffice" (p. 79). In the same study, Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) go back to saying that "a sample of six interviews may [be] sufficient to enable the development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p. 78). They argue that although saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews, the basic elements of meta-themes were present as early as six interviews. For this reason, I initially aimed to secure a number of six volunteers-participants for the interviews (students/teachers) within the same case study (university), and more interviewees were added until saturation occurred. The background information of each case study participant is provided in the following sections:

### 3.3.5. Students-participants' background information

The purpose of this section is to establish a profile of the participants, which helps in discussing the research data in the analysis stages. This went under the rubric of demographic information. The background information of the students in both cases is presented in the following two elements:

#### a. University (A) students

The research employs both questionnaires and interviews within the same case study. Therefore, two data sets are generated from the two research instruments employed. Each of these data sets presents background information about the participating students in the survey and in the interviews:

Table 4  
*Background information of university (A) students (questionnaire)*

Gender	Questionnaire			Total	
	Male	Female			
	n= 15	n= 30		n= 45	
Age	20 to 25	26 to 30	More than 30		
	n= 42	n= 1	n= 2		n= 45
Place of living	The city	A province	University Accommodation		
	n= 32	n= 9	n= 2		n= 43
Socio-economic status	Low	Lower-middle	Upper-middle	high	Total
	n= 1	n= 20	n= 18	n= 1	
Level of English	Low	Average	Good	Excellent	Total
	n= 0	n= 15	n= 26	n= 4	

The first case study consists of 45 students, with a majority of 30 female respondents (66%). 42 participants mentioned that they were aged between 20 and 25, and most of them (32 students) lived in the city centre nearby, where the university is located. Only nine students, who make up 20% of the sample, said that they lived in one of the city provinces. Most students' responses about their socio-economic status were distributed between the lower-

middle (20 students) and upper-middle (18 students). Finally, the student participants were based in the department of English, and they were considered advanced EFL students. This explains their responses, in which 26 of them reported that they had a good/excellent level of English. None of the students said that they had a low level of English, while 15 of them identified their English level as average.

As indicated in the methodology chapter, the student interviewees in this study were chosen from the questionnaire respondents. A total of 12 interviewees were recruited. The interviewees were aged between 20 and 25 years old. Their answers helped in providing more details about the overall students' background, particularly in narrating their learning experiences at university. Although the number of participants was only 12, it made up 25% of the whole parent population, and that was because of the relatively small number of master's degree students at this university. The student interviewees in this case also confirmed that they all belonged to the same speciality named "English language and communication."

**b. University (B) students**

Students from the university (B) received the same questionnaire as their counterparts from university (A). In that regard, the following section presents the background information on the student sample from the second case:

Table 5  
Background information university (B) students (questionnaire)

	Questionnaire				Total
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Female			
	n=14	n= 40			n= 54
<b>Age</b>	20 to 25	26 to 30	More than 30		
	n= 48	n= 5	n= 2		n= 55
<b>Place of living</b>	The city	A province	University Accommodation		
	n= 39	n= 5	n= 10		n= 54
<b>Socio-economic status</b>	Low	Lower-middle	Upper-middle	High	
	n= 5	n= 18	n= 28	n= 1	n= 52

<b>Level of English</b>	Low	Average	Good	Excellent
	n= 2	n= 13	n= 24	n= 14
				n= 53

The second case study consisted of 55 students. Students who responded to the questionnaire were asked about their gender, age range, place of living, their perception of their socio-economic status, and level in the English language. All these elements were found to be to a great extent similar to the ones presented in the data from the first case, with only some slight differences if comparing the two tables above. Having similar backgrounds was an early indication of similar responses from the participants. However, it was quite an assumption at this stage of research.

The case study at University (B) involved 14 interviewees (5 males and 9 females) aged between 21 and 25 years old. Unlike the first case study, where interviewees were only full-time students, the sample of this case study consisted of three employees who were enrolled as full-time students but also had part-time jobs in language schools and private companies. As for the interviewees' major, although they had the same background education in licence degree and belonged to the same faculty and department, they currently studied different specialties at the master's level, as indicated in table 5 below:

Table 6  
*Specialities of university (B) students-interviewees*

<b>English specialities</b>	<b>Students</b>
Didactics	n= 6
Literature and civilization	n= 4
Computational linguistics	n= 2
Language, culture, and enterprise	n= 2
Total	n= 14

Although the participants in both cases were majoring in different specialties, they were often identified as EFL students because they belonged to the faculty of foreign languages and the department of English in particular. At this point, I think it would be useful to note that the samples from both study cases are relatively similar. They all belonged to the same age group, and they also had the same educational background in the licence degree. Furthermore, they all belonged to the department of English. Having presented the two study samples and the

similarities in backgrounds between them, now I shall move on to presenting the teachers' background information.

### 3.3.6. Teachers-participants' background information

This section presents details about the teachers-sample employed in the interviews and questionnaires of this study. Teachers in both the interviews and the questionnaire answered questions about their gender, years of experience, and the position they hold at the university. However, before presenting any of these, it is important to remember that, just like students' findings, the findings of teachers from the two case studies were very similar, and this encouraged me to present their data jointly to avoid repetition. Having made this clear, this background section shall first present statistical data from teachers at university (A) followed by data from their counterparts at university (B).

#### a. University (A) teachers

The participating teachers were all from the same department of English at the first university. Details about their gender, teaching experiences, their position at the university, and the classes they teach were all addressed in the questionnaire and interviews, as presented in the table below:

Table 7  
*University (A) teachers' background information (questionnaires & interviews)*

Gender	Questionnaire		Total	
	Males	Females		
	n= 6	n= 8	n= 14	
Work Position	Full-time	Part-time	Total	
	n= 8	n= 6		n= 14
Teaching Experience in years	From 0-5	From 6-10	More than 10	Total
	n= 8	/	n= 6	
Classes they teach	Masters	License	Both	Total
	/	n= 6	n= 8	
Work Position	Interviews		Total	
	Full-time	Part-time		
	n= 4	n= 3	n= 7	

<b>Teaching Experience in years</b>	From 0-5	From 6-10	More than 10	
	n= 3	n= 1	n= 3	n= 7
<b>Classes they teach</b>	Masters	License	Both	
	/	n= 2	n= 5	n= 7

Of the 21 teachers who were approached, 14 of them handed back the questionnaire, which gives a response rate of 67%. As the table above shows, of those 14 teachers-participants in the department of English, eight were female and six were male. Some teachers had more years of experience than others, six of them have taught for more than 10 years, and the remaining eight teachers had less than five years of experience in tertiary education. Teachers were also asked about the positions they hold and the classes they teach. Part-time teachers who made up six of the sample mentioned that they teach only "licence classes" (undergrads). As for full-time teachers, who mostly happen to have more than 10 years of experience, they mentioned that they teach both licence and master's students.

Teachers for in-depth interviews were volunteers from the same department and from within the same questionnaire sample illustrated in the section above. Two of the interviewees taught undergraduate licence students, while the remaining five interviewees taught both levels of master's and licence students. During the interviews, teachers also mentioned that they teach a variety of modules like methodology, social human sciences, English for specific purposes, didactics, discourse analysis, and oral/written expression for licence classes.

### ***b. University (B) teachers***

Just like in the previous case study, the participating teachers in the second case were all from the department of English. They were also asked the same questions as their counterparts in case (1). Their details are presented in the following table:

Table 8  
*University (B) teachers' background information (questionnaires & interviews)*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Questionnaire</b>		<b>Total</b>
	Males	Females	
	n= 4	n= 7	n= 11
<b>Work Position</b>	Full-time	Part-time	

	n= 10	n= 1		n= 11
<b>Teaching Experience in years</b>	From 0-5	From 6-10	More than 10	
	n= 2	n= 2	n= 7	n= 11
<b>Classes they teach</b>	Masters	License	Both	
	n= 3	n= 3	n= 5	n= 11
<b>Interviews</b>				
<b>Work Position</b>	Full-time	Part-time		
	n= 9	/		n= 9
<b>Teaching Experience in years</b>	From 0-5	From 6-10	More than 10	
	n= 2	n= 1	n= 6	n= 9
<b>Classes they teach</b>	Masters	License	Both	
	/	/	n= 9	n= 9

As the table above entails, seven of the questionnaire teachers-respondents were females and four were males. Ten of the respondents were full-time teachers, and seven of them had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Three teachers said that they teach master's students, and the other three teachers said that they teach undergraduates. However, five of the respondents mentioned that they teach both master's and licence degree students. On the other hand, the interviewees' sample consisted of only nine teachers, all of whom held full-time positions, and six of whom had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Also, all of them teach both postgraduate and undergraduate students.

In the end, after having illustrated the background information of the teachers-participants, the succeeding section presents the criteria for choosing the two universities.

### **3.3.7. The selection criteria of universities**

The research site of the study was selected according to the criteria of 'suitability' and 'feasibility' (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This research was conducted at the English department of two Algerian universities. These universities were chosen based on their socio-cultural and socio-economic differences. The decision to highlight the socio-cultural and



socio-economic variables was informed by Hamad (2018), Kemala (2016), and Palfreyman and Smith (2003). These studies emphasise the need to consider how the aforementioned variables influence learner autonomy understandings and practices. In addition to that, the two universities differ in history and size. On the one hand, university (A) is relatively new; it runs only one master's programme, and the number of students enrolled does not exceed 50. On the other hand, university (B) is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Algeria. Also, master's students in the concerned department are three times the number of their counterparts in the first university, and they are enrolled in a variety of specialties. Eventually, the differences noted between the two universities are meant to probe other variables, which shall be further explored in this research. In addition, the universities (A) and (B) were chosen for the possibility of access, which turned out to be very helpful during the outbreak of COVID-19, when it was a tricky time to conduct fieldwork. Having presented the rationale behind the methodological decisions made in this research, I shall now move on to describe the physical institutional setting, which plays an important role in informing the research about educational context related variables that are relevant to this study.

### **3.3.8. Description of the physical institutional setting**

The study was conducted in Algeria, a developing country that has witnessed a shift in its system of higher education that has led to a growing interest in the notion of learner autonomy. While the rationale for selecting the research site was given in the methodology chapter, this section presents a description of the physical institutional setting of the universities. This involves their geographical situation and details about their history, pedagogical capacities, and the courses offered in the department of English. This description of the establishments involved in this research helped in understanding the affordances and limitations that the learning environment placed on the study participants. Therefore, this was of great importance when analysing the participants' data about the core issue of the research.

#### ***a. University (A)***

The first university is located in a small province in one of the northern cities of Algeria. It is a public university newly built in 2008 with a new department of English, which was founded in 2012. The university is located in a city that can be described as relatively small and known for its agricultural production and the conservative values of its people. Having carried out

the data collection there allowed me to frequently visit the main campus, which holds the department of English and the library. In addition, my description of the university is informed by the answers of the interviewees (students and teachers) whose answers confirmed what was noted about the physical setting of the research context.

The current institution was upgraded from a university centre to a fully functioning university in the last two years. However, regardless of the novelty of the buildings (particularly those that are allocated for students at the department of English), many of them are either under construction or require maintenance. Such conditions were reported in both students' and teachers' data. In that regard, students in the interviews mentioned their need for some basic materials like windows and power sockets. Teachers also expressed their resentment at the continuous electric cuts, not having decent lightning in the early mornings, not having air conditioners, not having classrooms equipped with data shows, and even IT rooms for students to use laptops. These maintenance and technology problems outreached the library, which lacks many necessary equipment. For instance, not having an online platform to access digital study material, a lack of computers, and a lack of staff. In addition, students were not able to navigate through bookshelves, simply because books are kept away from students in sections where only librarians can access them. Furthermore, the library closes as early as 5 p.m. during term time because it is based within the university campus, which closes around that time. On top of all that, students described the library as a club, since it is just one huge open space where students come to play chess and meet their friends.

#### ***b. University (B)***

This university is located in one of the biggest cities in Algeria, with a condensed population of over a million inhabitants. It is known for its strategic location in the country as a coastal city and an economic power. The city is also home to people from different cities who go there to make a living, which gives it to some extent an atmosphere of openness to people from different backgrounds. However, at the level of the campus where the study was carried out, this university seemed very similar to the first one. To begin with, this university is built in a remote area far from the city centre. Regardless of the novelty of the main campus, it also lacks maintenance and technology integration inside the classroom. This was later confirmed by students in the interviews who gave similar responses to their counterparts at the first university. For instance, students reported frequent electricity cuts, weak mobile

service, no public internet for students, the absence of data-show devices in the classroom, and a lack of IT rooms for students to do research. The only difference that was noted at the level of structure is that university (B) has two libraries: a small library for the faculty of languages and a central library (a bigger library) that has books for all specialties and domains. However, neither of these two libraries had PCs for students to use. Therefore, students could only use the library as a study space and to get books, of which they mentioned that there were not that many, particularly in their domain of study.

### 3.4. Data collection

As indicated earlier in this section, this research consisted of two case studies conducted at two different universities. Each case study involves students and teachers from the department of English. Data from participants at both universities was first collected via questionnaires and then semi-structured interviews. Collecting the data was held both face-to-face and online, depending on the availability of the participants and with respect to COVID-19 restrictions. The data collection procedures are illustrated in the table below:

Table 9  
*Data collection procedures*

Case	Phase	Research Procedure	Type of procedure	Date
University (A) Case (1)	Phase 1	Distributing questionnaires to 1) students 2) teachers	Face to face	March 2020
	Phase 2	Interviewing students	Face to face	April 2020
	Phase 3	Interviewing teachers	Face to face	May 2020
	phase 4	Follow-up interviews for students	Online	December 2020
University (B) Case (2)	Phase 1	Distributing questionnaires to 1) students 2) teachers	Face to face and online	April 2020
	Phase 2	Interviewing students	Online	May 2020
	Phase 3	Interviewing teachers	Online open- ended questionnaire	June 2020

Data collection was planned in three phases for both case studies. However, a fourth phase (follow-up interviews) was introduced to Case (1) for practical reasons, as explained in the methodological changes section 3.6. In case (1), the students' questionnaire was first distributed, followed by the questionnaire designated for teachers. The same procedure was

followed for the second case study. After collecting the questionnaires from students and teachers at both universities, I interviewed the students and teachers from the first case study. Thus far, all the collected data was done in person, and the same data collection procedures were meant to be applied to the second case study, where students and teachers were approached and then interviewed. However, starting in mid-May 2020, I started approaching interviewees online because of COVID-19 restrictions. As a result, interviews with students from the second case study were conducted online. The time for each of the interviews for students and teachers, online and off-line, was between one hour and an hour and a half. As for the teachers in the second case study, they were very difficult to approach for interviews. Therefore, they were sent an open-ended online questionnaire that consisted of the interview questions (see Methodological Changes in Section 3.6). This research method is backed by Creswell (2012), who explained that "in qualitative survey interviews, an interviewer asks open ended questions without response options and listens to and record the comments of the interviewee" (p. 382).

It was not until the data from the second case study were collected that I conducted the follow-up interviews with the students of the first case study, which was because of the recently made changes to the students' interview guide (see Section 3.3.2.d). The follow-up interviews were also conducted under COVID-19 procedures, which compelled me to conduct them online via platforms of the students' choice like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Skype. Students' follow-up interviews also took from 20 to 40 minutes because they consisted of only eight main questions that were addressed to the interviewees. After explaining the data collection process, the following section will illustrate how the data were analysed, interpreted, and translated into findings.

### **3.5. Data analysis procedures**

One of the most important stages in research is "data analysis". In the journey of bringing new knowledge, it is important for a researcher to explain how the research data are translated into findings and how conclusions are drawn. These procedures speak for the quality of the research, its transferability, and its traceability. However, before presenting any of that, I shall refer to the table below, which demonstrates how different sources of data

address the questions of the research and eventually ensure the conduct of a clear and accurate analysis:

Table 10  
*Research questions addressed by sources of data and method of analysis*

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Source of data</b>	<b>Type of analysis</b>
What understandings/interpretations do students associate with the concept of learner autonomy?	Students' Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis
What understandings/interpretations do teachers associate with the concept of learner autonomy?	Teachers' Semi-structured interviews	
What characteristics do students associate with autonomous learners?	Students' Semi-structured interviews	
What characteristics do teachers associate with autonomous learners?	Teachers' Semi-structured interviews	
What factors influence students' autonomous learning?	Students' Semi-structured interviews	
What practices do students associate with autonomous learning?	Students' questionnaire	Descriptive and inferential statistics
	Students' Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis
What practices do teachers associate with autonomous learning?	Teachers' questionnaire	Descriptive and inferential statistics
	Teachers' Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis

As indicated in the table above, semi-structured interviews are the dominant data collection tool, whereas questionnaires mainly support the interviews in answering questions about learner autonomy practices attributed to students. The qualitative data obtained from the research participants is first transcribed according to Elliot (2005) in clean transcripts. The latter indicates a type of transcription that "focuses on the content of what was said. It makes the material easy to read" (p. 24). After transcribing the interviews, they were analysed manually according to Braun and Clarke (2006), which transfer raw data to a "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell" (p. 93).

Illustrations of how data were analysed are presented in the excerpts below from students' interviews in the second case study:

Figure 5  
*Transcribing the audio-recordings*

Me: can you please tell me about yourself?  
 [redacted]: my name is [redacted]. I am 25 I study English. I am an English teacher. And my specialty is Didactics and that is it I guess.  
 Me: Are you familiar with the concept of learner autonomy?  
 [redacted]: Yes.  
 Me: Can you give the translation of the concept of learner autonomy in Arabic?  
 [redacted]: استقلالية المتعلم  
 Me: What does this concept mean to you as a student majoring in the department of English?  
 [redacted]: for me, Learner autonomy I guess, it is being independent and doing research on my own while the teacher is just a guider and just a facilitator, so I am the one in charge, I am doing the conclusions and somehow being oriented but also somehow I am also responsible on my own decisions and the way my learning goes as far as how my skills go and etc.

Figure 6  
*Immersing myself in the data*

Me: where do these feelings of responsibility and independence come from?  
 [redacted]: I would say my sense of responsibility comes from my father he is always making sure that I learn things by myself I take good care of myself, so I was raised on this principle.

**QADER QADIROU**  
Independent in the sense that she does more research, she doesn't wait for the teacher to give her everything about the lesson.

**QADER QADIROU**  
Family influence (father) + Individual learning endeavours

Figure 7  
*Identifying and developing preliminary codes*

"I think mostly it has to do with the personality, how much and the way you want to improve yourself and curiosity too." Interviewee 9  
 "Mostly curiosity and the interest in reading and learning new things." Interviewee 9  
 "Being active and creative and hunger for knowledge and self-dependence". Interviewee 11  
 "I can say that it is being organised this helped me a lot" Interviewee 5  
 "I may say that I am persistent I have this thirst for challenge growing up. I was always being challenged by my brothers I tried to prove myself all the time... I like pressure, I like to challenge these two things make me do my best." Interviewee 1

Figure 8  
*Creating and refining themes*

Global theme	Organising theme (sub-theme)	Codes
Autonomy in learning the academic content	Doing research	Doing research ( <b>very popular</b> )
		Enriching one's knowledge
		Finding learning strategies to learn effectively
		Reading outside the classroom
		Not to rely on the information of teachers
	Critical thinking	Questioning information
	Ask questions	
	Critically think about what is learnt	
	Brainstorming	
Autonomy in learning the English language	Outside classroom independent language Learning	Find my own strategies in learning English
		Depend on myself in learning English
		Using unconventional learning materials like music, movies, and reading.
	Learning English from classroom context	Listening to teachers
		Participating inside the classroom
	Learning about grammar rules	

The above three excerpts briefly illustrate the data analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). To perform a thematic analysis, I first immersed myself in transcribing the verbal interviews that were audio-recorded. After that, I developed preliminary codes, which were put in key points. These "ideas" reflect what is in the data, yet they are not as narrow or as descriptive as the final product should be. At that point, I could look closely at codes, identify those that can be deleted, and identify those that make patterns and later make provisional themes. After themes were created, they were re-read, refined, and finally given labels that were used in the final product. The rationale for thematic analysis was reported by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is that it "seeks to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts that are provided." (p.85). This type of analysis seems to serve the objectives of this research, which tackles learner autonomy in relevance to context-related issues.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, questionnaires also contributed to the gathering of demographic information about the participants and listing learner autonomy practices that primarily address language learning. The questionnaires entailed both closed-ended and open-ended items. The closed-ended questions were analysed through a descriptive and inferential statistical approach, in which results were calculated in means and standard deviations. As for open-ended questions, they were thematically analysed through a similar approach to the interviews, as indicated earlier. On a different note, the correlation between quantitative and qualitative data is mainly complementary. Qualitative data inspired by the interviews make the main source of data in this research, while quantitative data

presents a generalizability element to the sample from which the interviews and the questionnaire respondents were taken. Therefore, as shall be later noted in the following chapter, quantitative data will mostly support the research with, firstly, statistical information that helps build a profile for the research sample. Secondly, supporting themes generated from the interviews with numeral data provide a certain extent of generalizability of results. In addition to this, numerical data also helps in drawing on the similarities and differences that result between the two chosen universities, and between students and teachers within the one university.

Having explained the data analysis procedures, it is important to add that the data were analysed separately at the level of cases (universities) and at the level of participants (students and teachers). Having done that separately, students' and teachers' findings from the same university were compared to highlight points of agreement and differences. As for cross-case analysis, Yin (2014) suggests a replication strategy that entails the researcher examining any matching patterns between case studies to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under research, and eventually this would give the research its comparative stance.

### **3.6. Methodological changes**

Conducting research is a complex process in which researchers need to dare to ask daunting questions while keeping an open mind for potential changes that are sometimes necessary. I started my research with the idea of investigating English language learner autonomy from a socio-cultural perspective, in which I employ a bottom-up approach to investigate the concerned concept. However, as I approached the students-interviewees of the first case in this study, their answers helped me realise that the context of the research entails more than language learning matters. As a result of this revelation, I needed to adjust the interview questions in order not to narrow the interviewees' focus to language learner autonomy. For instance, I changed the question "What does learner autonomy mean to you in learning the English language?" to "What does learner autonomy mean to you as a student majoring in the department of English?" The second question proved to incite students to speak more about different learner autonomy practices related to the various learning domains to which they could relate. As a result of this, I changed the questions on the interview guides to be



more suitable for my new, polished research idea. However, this consequently led to other methodological adjustments that were necessary at the time. For instance, I had to conduct follow-up interviews with the first case students in which I addressed the updated questions. Moreover, the questionnaires mainly revolved around language learner autonomy. Therefore, although they informed the language learning aspect of this research, they no longer became the focal source of data in the study.

Besides the birth of a new research idea that resulted in the briefly above-described methodological adjustments, the rapid spread of the coronavirus in 2020 presented a serious threat to participants in this research project and everybody else around the world. To begin with, I approached the first university in March 2020 when I gave out questionnaires. Afterwards, I started conducting interviews in April. At that time, I was slightly behind schedule, but I had collected the data I needed for the first case study by mid-May. The second case study was the one where I faced the most problems. First, it was difficult to find gatekeepers (teachers) to approach students collectively in their classrooms. Secondly, there were continuous strikes at university (B). By the time I was waiting for the strikes to end, it was exams time, which meant that I needed to wait even longer. However, amid all that, I was able to collect some questionnaire responses with the help of some teachers and students. Shortly after, news about the spread of the coronavirus alerted people, and it became even more difficult to approach participants from the second university, especially since it is located over 120 kilometres away from the place where I was staying in Algeria.

As the news about the COVID-19 outbreak started to spread and confirmed cases of COVID rose to their highest rates, people started applying social distancing measures everywhere, including universities. Moreover, I received an email from my university (Manchester Metropolitan) urging research students to avoid contact with participants and switch to virtual data collection methods, if possible, as indicated in the following excerpt below.

Figure 9

*University email communication concerning collecting data in the time of Covid-19*

### **Face-To-Face participation granted existing ethical approval**

In the light of the COVID19 pandemic, Manchester Metropolitan University requires all ongoing research to make changes to how participant interactions are conducted. All researchers who had planned to engage in face-to-face activities with participants must now consider whether they are able to conduct interactions remotely. If this is not possible, then data collection related to research activities should be temporarily paused until further notice.

*Note.* Sourced from art and humanities ethics email communications

Given the COVID-19 situation and the new data collection regulations imposed by the ethical committee at Manchester Metropolitan University, I found myself in a position to resume my data collection in the second case study remotely through virtual means. The method of answering students' and teachers' questionnaires was changed to be online via Bristol Online Surveys, which is a secure and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) compliant platform to run surveys. As for interviews, they were also planned to be conducted online via whichever means participants found suitable. Although the use of technology in collecting data has several advantages, it was not welcomed, especially by teachers at the time. The difficulty of accessing teachers made me change my idea of an audio-visual interview to an open-ended online questionnaire. As for students, many of them who answered the questionnaire showed interest in the research and expressed willingness to collaborate. Online interviews were also employed in the follow-up interviews intended for students in the first case study since they were conducted after the outbreak of COVID-19.

In sum, regardless of the changes I made to the topic of research and the data collection instruments, I managed to collect the necessary data to keep the research in progress and move on to the phase of data analysis, which is discussed in the next chapter. Having addressed this, in the coming sections I tackle the ethical considerations and protocols taken into account in the conduct of this research.

### **3.7. Ethical considerations**

My ethical procedures journey commenced by obtaining ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University (see Appendix Eight). After that, I obtained written consent from both universities' English departments, where my research took place (see Appendices Nine

and Ten). The third ethical procedure that I dealt with was with the research participants. Initially, questionnaires were made anonymous. As for interview respondents, they were given consent forms to sign explaining the confidentiality of the interview and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time of their choice (see Appendix Six). In addition to this, the consent forms also assure that all data used only for this research are in my possession and are assessed by me or my supervisors if necessary. As for means of protection, all paper-based questionnaires were kept in a safely locked drawer in my room. As for digital-based data like interviews, audio recordings, and online questionnaires, they were uploaded to my MMU "One Drive," where they were always kept safe. Having done all that, this research has strictly met and adhered to the ethical guidelines of Manchester Metropolitan University.

### **3.8. Research Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of research refers to the degree of confidence in the data collected, the interpretations of the researcher, and the protocols taken to maintain a readable and rigorous work (Connelly, 2016). As previously indicated, the research is driven by qualitative data from the interviews. Therefore, the criteria of qualitative investigation trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are shared in this section. These criteria are: 1) credibility; 2) transferability; 3) dependability; and 4) confirmability. These ethical guidelines were surely to be respected and followed from the onset of this research, as explained in the coming sections.

Credibility is regarded by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as one of the most important criteria. It is about having believable results that reflect the participants' perspectives. The credibility of this study is first enhanced by using multiple sources of data, namely, students and teachers. Collecting data from different sources provided multiple perspectives and solidified understandings of the context and the issue being investigated. Moreover, it gave us a chance to cross-check the collected data.

The transferability of research is defined by Trochim (2001) as "the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings". Trochim (2001) added that the transferability of research is increased by giving a rich and detailed description of the research context to help others successfully transfer the research results to similar contexts. The transferability of this research is enhanced by a thick and

thorough description of the large and specific research context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as this was addressed in Chapter Two of this research. These details must accompany the research results if they are to be transferred to at least other Algerian universities with similar specificities.

Dependability of research refers to transparency in narrating the process of collecting and interpreting data and the possibility of tracking the process of how conclusions were made (Trochim, 2001). This also shows how accurate and consistent the findings are with the general data. The dependability of the research is increased in different ways. First, my openness about the challenges and advantages I had when collecting and analysing data, which were made clear earlier in this section with sufficient rationale, The dependability of results is also ensured by using different data collection tools that were specifically drafted for the conduct of this research. In addition, the results of the research increased in dependability since they were conducted in two settings. Such research endeavours present more validation for the research process and findings.

The last criterion is confirmability, which is an element that concerns qualitative research. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), "confirmability concerns the aspect of neutrality. You need to secure the intersubjectivity of the data. The interpretation should not be based on your own particular preferences and viewpoints but needs to be grounded in the data." (p. 122). Korstjens and Moser (2018) follow by suggesting the strategy of an audit trail, in which the researcher provides notes on decisions made during the whole conduct of the research to ensure the transparency of the research journey for the reader. Confirmability in this research is increased by the evidence provided in quotes from the study participants and screenshots of the data analysis process, as explained in earlier sections. Transparency in sharing all these elements, which are traceable to their original sources, qualifies the research to meet the criterion of confirmability.

In addition to the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are discussed above, the research's trustworthiness is further enhanced by other means. For instance, it was externally audited three times and in several stages for the milestones that I passed in my journey as a PhD student. The academic committee in the milestones' panels made sure that my work meets the academic standard of a PhD. Moreover, the conferences in which I

presented my research also provided a good opportunity to share my work and obtain feedback, which I used to refine my research idea and thesis in general.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

The current chapter aims to give details about the methodological design of this research. It first presented the philosophical stance, the research design, and the rationale behind it. Moreover, it illustrated the procedures for data collection and analysis. In the end, research ethics were assured to be adhered to, and the trustworthiness of the research was verified. Having explained this all, the coming chapter puts the methodological design into practice by giving the interpretations and analyses of the collected data.

## Chapter Four: Data analysis and interpretations

### 4.1. Chapter Introduction

The current chapter presents the analysis and findings of the two case studies that are presented in the methodology chapter. According to Goodrick (2014), "There are no set rules or defined requirements for the presentation of comparative case studies" (p. 9). As the findings revealed more similarities than differences when analysing each case study separately, a decision was made to present the analysis and findings of the two case studies jointly. In this regard, Goodrick (2014) reported that in circumstances such as the case of this research, "the evaluator will be synthesizing the evidence gathered in the report, so it is important to ensure that they provide sufficient information to communicate succinctly but in a transparent manner" (p. 9).

The current chapter commences by presenting students' findings about familiarity, understandings, and contextual interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy. These findings are followed by a section about the characteristics and learning practices that students associate with learner autonomy. Within the same section, illustrations about the factors influencing students' autonomous learning practices, understandings, and interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy are presented. Students' findings are followed by findings from teachers, in which understandings and interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy are presented and succeeded by illustrations about the practices and characteristics of autonomous learners. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief summary in which general thoughts about the findings are shared.

### 4.2. Students' epistemological positions on learner autonomy

Before investigating what the concept of learner autonomy means to students, it is logical to wonder if they are familiar with the term "learner autonomy" in the first place. Knowing that the participants are familiar with the terminology would eventually help in overcoming the language barrier. Also, it would not be reasonable to ask students about a technical concept using words in English that they may not know. In that regard, students were asked in the questionnaire if they were familiar with the term "learner autonomy", and their responses were as follows:

Table 11  
*Students' familiarity with the term "learner autonomy"*

	Case (1)/ (University A)		Case (2)/ (University B)	
Yes	25	56%	16	32%
No	07	16%	16	32%
Somehow	13	28%	18	36%
Total	45	100	50	100%

As the table above entails, 56% of students in the first case study reported that they knew what the term "learner autonomy" meant. However, the remaining 44% reported that they either did not know what learner autonomy meant or were unsure about it. As for students in case (2), their responses were almost evenly distributed among the three given options (yes, no, or somehow). This entailed 68% of students from university (B) who did not know or were not sure of what the term of learner autonomy meant. These statistics show that the sample of this research varied between those who are familiar with the term "learner autonomy" and those who are not.

The investigation about how familiar the notion of learner autonomy is to students continued by requesting from the student sample that they give the equivalent of the concept in Arabic, which is their mother tongue. Their responses are demonstrated in the table below.

Table 12  
*Equivalence of the notion LA in the mother tongue*

Students' responses		Case (1) (University A)		Case (2) (University B)	
Translation in English	Answers in Arabic				
Independent learning	استقلال المتعلم/الطالب	10	31%	13	46%
Self-instruction	التعلم الذاتي	20	62%	10	35%
Persistence and motivation in learning	العصامية في التعلم	2	6%	2	7%
Freedom in learning	الحرية في التعلم	/	/	2	7%
Individual learning	التعلم الفردي	/	/	1	3%
		32	100%	28	100%

In their attempts to translate the concept of learner autonomy, students gave several suggestions, as shown in Table 11 above. However, the most two frequently mentioned translations are independent learning "استقلال المتعلم/الطالب" and self-instruction "التعلم الذاتي".

The former translation was mentioned in the first and second case studies at a ratio of 46% and 31%, respectively. On the other hand, learner autonomy was translated to self-instruction by 62% of students in the second case study and by 35% of students in the first one. Other translations, like persistence and motivation in learning, marginally emerged in both cases. These concepts were translated to "العصامية في التعلم". In addition, three students from Case (2) suggested the terms freedom in learning and individual learning as the equivalent of learner autonomy.

Students were asked about the term "learner autonomy" in English, which is a foreign language to them. The reason why questions about learner autonomy were asked in English is the lack of consensus on a translation in Arabic that does justice to the meaning that the concept entails. Some students struggled to find the appropriate equivalence for the term "learner autonomy". In that respect, attempts to give the equivalent of the term "learner autonomy" in Arabic were notably low. However, students' unfamiliarity with the terminology does not necessarily mean that they are not familiar with the ideas and values of autonomy in learning. This could be because those ideas are concealed in a technical word that they do not know. This argument was noted by interviewee (5) from the second case study, who said:

Honestly, before you come and tell us about your research topic, I was not really familiar with the word (terminology), but I was familiar with the concept (idea)

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

In the end, requesting the translation of the concept of learner autonomy from students in the questionnaire and the interviews gave insight into learner autonomy as a concept associated with independence in learning and self-instruction. This investigation gave me a lead to further unpack what students exactly meant by these terms that they saw as equivalent to learner autonomy. This is addressed in the following section, where I shift the focus from investigating students' familiarity with the term "learner autonomy" to exploring their understandings of this notion.

### **4.3. Students' understandings of the concept of learner autonomy**

While familiarity with the concept of learner autonomy was chiefly addressed in the questionnaires, interviews provided in-depth illustrations of what learner autonomy meant to them. Initially, the student interviewees were straightforwardly asked if they thought of



themselves as autonomous learners. Responses to this question were positive, as all respondents in both case studies affirmed that they think of themselves as autonomous learners to different degrees. They said:

I see myself as an autonomous learner and even other people consider me as an autonomous learner

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

Yes, to some extent, I do research, and I read outside the classroom, and inside the classroom I help creating a good learning environment. Also, to me the end of university degree does not mean the end of learning

**Student Interviewee 11, Case (2)**

Students' views of themselves as autonomous learners enabled me to ask them more questions to elaborate on what the concept of learner autonomy means to them and how they manifest autonomy. However, before presenting what the students understand by the term learner autonomy, I would like to note that the translations of this concept as addressed in earlier sections reappeared in the interviews. In that regard, although some students translated learner autonomy as self-instruction while others translated it as independent learning, the interviewees' responses about what learner autonomy meant to them demonstrated an overlap between these two translations. The interviewees often used the concepts of independence in learning and self-instruction interchangeably across the interviews. For instance, interviewee (5) in the first case study mentioned that learner autonomy is "related to self-learning". After that, he elaborated that being autonomous entails depending on oneself to decide the activities that students use to learn without the need to rely on teachers to provide instructions word for word.

In the end, the interviewees' responses to what they understood by learner autonomy led to the emergence of the overarching theme "the ability to learn by oneself". This theme mirrored students' explanations of what learner autonomy means as a concept that reflects both independence and responsibility in learning. This is further illustrated in the following section:

#### **4.3.1. The ability to learn by oneself**

The students' interviewees were initially asked what they thought learner autonomy meant. What was noted in the students' responses in both case studies is that they tended to describe autonomous learners and what learner autonomy entails rather than defining the concept itself. In other words, they explained the concept of learner autonomy by describing the values of independence and responsibility in learning. In that regard, the students-interviewees said:

Learner autonomy I guess, it is being independent and doing research on my own while the teacher is just a guider and just a facilitator so I'm the one in charge, I am doing the conclusions and somehow being oriented but also somehow, I am also responsible on my own decisions and the way my learning goes as far as how my skills go

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

... it is to be responsible learner to have a conscious about your education and you want to do your part of the bargain, teachers are teaching you and providing you with information, and your part of the bargain is to do your homework, do research and revise lessons. And I do that most of the time.

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

Well, it is about teaching yourself. If you want to learn something you go and do it by yourself without any help from other, you get everything by yourself without anyone else's help... However, even when we decide to do things by ourselves, we still need help of teachers and others.

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

Learner autonomy is students' reception of information inside the classroom and work on extending those information outside the classroom. So, it about students' efforts to understand the studies and the ideas that the teachers give

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

In all the quotes above, students describe learner autonomy as a state where students function on their own. Students had more individualistic views of learner autonomy as a

concept that implied having the ability to operate in situations without the need for a teacher or an instructor. However, only three students from the first case study described learner autonomy as a full detachment from the teacher in situations where students are completely on their own. Interviewee (4) said:

Well surface wise Yes. I have some concepts here and there about how to study by yourself in an environment where you can't get your teachers' help. It is only you, and the use of some kind of material like a book or internet... I am not going to wait for a teacher or a family member or a friend to tell me you should go search for this or you should learn about this

**Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

The quote above describes a situation where teachers are not involved, which compels students to rely on themselves to direct and manage their own learning without any outside interference. However, one of the interview questions was about the role of the teacher in students' learning experiences. In response to this question, all students acknowledged that teachers have a critical role in guiding and facilitating students' learning. In that regard, interviewee (8) said:

The teacher is very important in the learning teaching process but learners ... (students) rely on a tutor or a guider to help by telling him what to do, but not fully, you should not be fully dependent on that teacher.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (1)**

Learner autonomy, as explained by students, involves the possibility of having teachers as supportive elements in the learning process. Therefore, to them, being autonomous does not mean complete reliance on oneself. However, what is worth noting is the students' description of the concept as an individual process. Students mostly referred to individual practices, as reported earlier by the interviewees (1) and (8), where autonomy entailed an aspect of individualism in doing research outside the classroom. These could be interpreted as cases of isolation in learning. Therefore, questions were asked about whether being autonomous means completely relying on oneself even when students need help. In this regard, the interviewees asserted that they could ask for help when needed and that this

would not make them any less autonomous, which is what interviewee (2) affirmed in the following excerpt:

No, you can still learn with a group of people, and you still be doing autonomous learning. So, it is about your capabilities and skills to collaborate in work with others

#### **Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Overall, this section investigated what students understood by the concept of learner autonomy. In that regard, students' findings broadly illustrated learner autonomy as having "the ability to learn by oneself". This ability consists of values of independence and a sense of responsibility for learning. Although "the ability to learn by oneself" entails aspects of individualist learning behaviours, the interviewees' emphasised that autonomous learning is not about isolating oneself when learning. However, it is about being able to learn in situations where the teacher's assistance is not available. This primarily describes learning outside the classroom context, where students are compelled to depend on themselves in the pursuit of knowledge. This consequently reflects the examples that all students-interviewees provided, which consisted of furthering one's knowledge outside the classroom context. Having explored what students understand by the concept of learner autonomy, more context-specific interpretations of this concept are presented and illustrated in the succeeding section.

#### **4.4. Students' contextual interpretations of learner autonomy**

Findings in the previous section showed that students broadly understood learner autonomy as "the ability to learn by oneself". This understanding was also connected to the outside classroom context. Moreover, students also showed that learner autonomy does not mean self-isolation and is based on values of independence, responsibility in learning. Although these findings inform the research by giving insights about learner autonomy from students' perspectives, they do not particularly address the main questions that this research has drawn from the beginning. Therefore, more detailed, and context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy are elicited and presented in this section. Such findings are mainly the result of students' elaboration on the translations they gave at the beginning of the investigation and questions about their thoughts about the notion of learner autonomy, what learner

autonomy means to them, and the ways they think their autonomy manifests in learning situations. This investigation was also informed by the students' learning roles inside and outside the classroom, and the skills and characteristics that students associated with learner autonomy.

The students-interviewees' responses in this section involved contextual examples and explanations, which helped in addressing the research questions of this study. However, before presenting any of the findings, it is necessary to explain that the findings from the students were very context related. In other words, for students, learner autonomy occurred in different contexts and served different learning objectives. Consequently, each context and learning objective called for specific learning practices and the extent of freedom with which those practices were enacted. As a result, students' findings presented different varieties of learner autonomy that are subject to the context of learning and the learning objectives aimed to achieve. Eventually, the different varieties of learner autonomy that resulted from students' findings were presented in a hierarchical order in which students shifted interpretations and eventually autonomous learning practices in multiple learning contexts. Having explained this, the first interpretations of learner autonomy that were reported by students took place beyond the educational system. And it is illustrated in the following section:

#### **4.4.1. Learner autonomy beyond the educational system**

When students described what learner autonomy meant to them, five interviewees gave examples of their autonomous learning activities in different domains like computer programming, learning other languages, playing the guitar, astronomy, and dermatology. Students' responses implied that they were self-taught by nature, which is something that manifests in their lives in general and not only concerning their academic context. This is indicated in the following examples from the students' responses about what makes them think that they are autonomous learners. They said:

Also, when I studied maths and computer programming, I liked the idea of studying by myself even if I do mistakes or whatever, also if I know that there is a teacher or something in the internet who is going to correct me I am going to have at least try to learn by myself

### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Listen, I am an English student, I study English, but if something in science interests me I would just go deeper in the subject. For example, dermatology. I am very interested in that even though it is not my speciality, I spend my whole free time watching videos about dermatology and all the creams, anything about dermatology interests me.

### **Student Interviewee 14, Case (2)**

The student interviewees regarded learning as an integral aspect of their lives. They described themselves as always ready to learn more and grow their skills and intellect, regardless of their academic responsibilities for their formal education. For instance, in the quotes mentioned above, there are examples of situations where students depended on themselves to learn in different domains. For instance, the interviewees (4) and (14) from cases 1 and 2, respectively, are autonomous learners because they took the initiative and succeeded in learning or perhaps teaching themselves skills and information without being told that they should do it or how to do it. Therefore, to them, the fact that their learning was self-initiated and entirely independent qualifies them to label themselves as autonomous learners.

Students' learner autonomy in learning non-academic content beyond the classroom context was intriguing as it responded to the claims about students in this context not having the ability for autonomous learning, presumably because of their non-supportive cultural background for values of independence. In that regard, the students' interviewees were also asked how they developed those values of responsibility and independence that made them think that they were autonomous learners and behave accordingly. Responses to this question informed the findings of the factors influencing students' perceptions of the concept of learner autonomy as tackled in Section 4.8.

This interpretation of learner autonomy that students gave is based on an outside classroom context and in domains that are not relevant to their formal education or their educational setting. This interpretation of learner autonomy also goes along with ideas of complete freedom in learning, which reflect a situation where students are entirely independent and assume full responsibility for their learning decisions, materials of learning, and learning

progress. Therefore, students described one variety of learner autonomy that took place beyond the educational system and was not conditioned by a formal learning environment or pre-determined learning objectives. This consequently puts students in a position where they are entirely responsible for their learning process.

The students-interviewees also interpreted the concept of learner autonomy in their formal academic context, which is often conditioned by a particular academic learning environment and implies pre-determined learning objectives. These learning conditions resulted in another variety of learner autonomy, which implied relatively less freedom for action in comparison to learner autonomy beyond the educational system.

#### **4.4.2. Learner autonomy in students' academic context**

Although students referred to themselves as autonomous learners in multiple domains, it is the objective of this study to explore understandings and interpretations of this concept in the department of English. Therefore, the scope of the interview was narrowed down to include questions about what learner autonomy means to the participants as students majoring in the department of English. However, before exploring this, 10 interviewees clearly identified two different learning goals, each with reference to different practices, roles, characteristics, and eventually different interpretations of learner autonomy. Students explained their binary learning objectives in their academic learning context in the following excerpts:

Well, the language is important, but what about the modules, you are not going to do that with the teacher, you are going to talk about scientific topics. You are going to talk about something which can't be talked about just because you know how to speak English, you know what I am saying, and if you are talking about the way I learn English language and not the knowledge about modules and stuff, I have been counting on myself in doing that for a very long time.

**Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

Especially in language learning, I mean teachers at university are not teaching you the language especially in master's level. In license we had like oral expression, written expression and grammar but after that in third year it was over.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

Just to clarify, when I speak within the context "majoring in English," I don't mean "studying the language in general," it's rather studying about certain sciences, and subjects, in the concerned language.

#### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

The distinction made by students in terms of their learning goals was clear. The interviewees regarded themselves as language learners, but at the same time, they were responsible for learning academic content that made part of their course. The two learning goals identified by students created two different learning routes for autonomy on which their interpretation of the concept was based. In addition, students' findings also presented a theme in which autonomy in the academic context was about freedom in learning. This is to be addressed after both interpretations of autonomy concerning learning the formal academic content and learning the English language are presented in the coming subsections.

##### ***a. Engaging in outside classroom independent research***

Doing research about the formal academic content that makes part of the students' degree emerged as one of the earliest themes in the students' data in both case studies. Students referred to doing research when answering all the questions asked about what learner autonomy means to them as students majoring in the department of English. This was further confirmed in the succeeding questions about their roles as students and the characteristics they attributed to themselves as autonomous learners. This is indicated in the following excerpts:

I ask for the programme of the module from my teachers, I take the title or the overview of our lessons, I take note of all of that, and when I get home, I make time to go through all of them and research them on the internet.

#### **Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

I do research, I ask the teachers to give me the syllabus of the whole semester and I go do research on my own in order to have an idea about what I will be studying, and it helps me to participate inside the classroom.

#### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**



Mostly, you have to do research by yourself, of course you are going to need a curriculum and a syllabus but mostly you need to do research and develop your own way of learning.

**Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

So, I guess this is autonomy, you can dig deeper, you don't rely on what the teacher gave you of information, you can just go and do your own personal research and you would learn even more outside the classroom.

**Student Interviewee 14, Case (2)**

Students' responses in the quotes above seem to fall within their previous interpretation of learner autonomy as the ability to learn by oneself. The examples they gave involved having a sense of responsibility towards what they learn, taking initiative, and having an independent learning attitude in expanding on the information that they discuss with their teachers inside the classroom. To the interviewees, learner autonomy in their academic context goes along with doing research about the different modules that they study. To them, it is the process of doing research independently outside the classroom that characterises them as autonomous learners. In this process, students are meant to have a sense of independence and act accordingly when choosing their own learning strategies and materials. However, students seem to only have control over how to manage their learning outside the classroom and how deep they can go when doing research. Eventually, it is the teachers' decision to set the path for students to do that research, which is what all the interviewees in the quotes above indicated.

***b. Developing English Language skills outside classroom***

The second major theme that emerged from the interviews' data is relying on oneself to learn the English language beyond the classroom context. To begin with, although the interviewees are majoring in their respective fields in which they study specialised content knowledge, they also learn English, which in their context is the language of instruction and communication. Therefore, interpretations of what learner autonomy means to students sometimes deviate to tackle the language learning aspect. The interviewees' responses to what learner autonomy means to them as students in the department of English were described as the following:

It is when the learner learns the English language independently and in a way that the learner relies on himself, learning on himself individually using his own ways and learning strategies in learning which suits him best.

**Student Interviewee 11, Case (2)**

I think that I am 95% autonomous when it comes to learning the English language, in general, the 5% is from my teachers. I just don't feel like I get a lot or grasp a lot at university when it comes to learning English. English is learnt on my own and in my daily life ... well I think I am more autonomous when learning languages and I am not as much autonomous when I am learning modules like linguistics, civilization, literature and methodology. I think in these modules I need some help from the teachers.

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Most of my English learning I have done was through non-traditional means like playing games, watching movies and doing stuff in English. You can say that I pick it from there, so it was not an academic process.

**Student Interviewee 10, Case (2)**

The interviewees interpreted learner autonomy as their independence in learning the English language, or better said, ameliorating their language skills since they consider themselves to already have good or excellent language skills. In similar ways to doing research that took place outside the classroom, students' interpretations of learner autonomy in language learning also resided beyond the classroom context. However, the interviewees explained that their language learning was neither guided by teachers nor followed a certain syllabus or programme, like the research they do about the academic content that they study. For instance, interviewee (10) in the quote above refers to non-conventional learning materials like videogames, music, and movies that he used to develop his language skills. The student-interviewees mentioned that it is their role to ameliorate their language skills, which they consider a key element in the research they do and in their academic learning in general. For instance, when asked about her role as a student in the department of English, interviewee (9) said:

...ameliorate my pronunciation and vocabulary as well because these are important. Also, I need to use the English language more frequently and more often which would help inside the classroom.

#### **Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

Although the interviewees consistently mentioned that they are language learners, they made it clear that the classroom is not the place for them to learn the English language, especially at the level of a master's degree, where they do not have subjects that primarily target their language skills. In that regard, the interviewees explained that the English language has always been and still makes an integral part of their daily lives, even before they started their journey at university. Moreover, although students had the option to answer the question of this research in Arabic or mix languages, as in the Algerian dialect, they all preferred to have the interviews in English. This action itself shows how confident and comfortable the students are with their English language skills, and this was assured by several interviewees who said:

In my case, my everyday life is in English. I actually use English more than I use Arabic in my everyday life. even my thinking now is in English.

#### **Student Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

I reached to the point that I feel more comfortable using English than Arabic. It became part of my life, everything now to me is in English from the top process to the personification of that process from movies, music, stuff I watch, and the people I talk to, it is English, and I prefer to use English basically at all times.

#### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

The interviewees seem to be very comfortable with the English language, to the point that learning it and ameliorating it became more of a natural process. Students' efforts in ameliorating their language skills were entertaining, volitional, deliberative, independent, and out of their sense of responsibility towards the academic course they are enrolled in, which requires the mastery of the English language. Students asserted that their language is mainly reinforced through a variety of non-academic practices and activities. These activities and practices make part of their daily routines, and they can be summarised in the following

points: watching movies and listening to music, communicating in English, and reading and researching in English. In this regard, the interviewees said:

Songs I listen to are in English, movies are in English, the news I watch, and articles are in English, so I am really in contact with the language so yeah. It is very important part of my daily life.

**Student Interviewee 12, Case (2)**

Well, meeting friends is cruel to be in learning English, but when it comes to the bigger picture it is mostly because of watching movies, series, songs that is what I do mostly all the time.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (1)**

I read books, novels, I read approximately one book in two weeks... In general, I revise my lessons on daily basis and do research as well.

**Student Interviewee 6, Case (2)**

The student-interviewees mentioned various language learning activities like watching movies, listening to music, reading books, using social media to connect with native speakers of the language, and talking to their friends in English. When doing these activities, students would not only be ameliorating their skills, but they would also be entertaining themselves. These activities were the first they mentioned when it comes to developing their English, and they reported that they have been effective for them even before the start of their formal language learning journey at school. All these activities polished their skills in command of the language's technicalities, speaking, and writing skills.

The interviewees were able to create opportunities to communicate in English with friends, classmates, and foreigners on social media. On the other hand, three students-interviewees in the second case study who were also professionals said that they use English in their work, which is an obligation but at the same time a chance for them to improve their English language skills. There were also three interviewees from Case (2) who said that they use English with their families. Thus far, it would be safe to say that students' reported language learning activities are very informal and that they take place outside the classroom context.

Overall, all interviewed students expressed that they integrate English into their personal lives, and this was not only out of necessity to meet the requirements of university learning. But it is also out of interest in and love for the language. The interviewees reported that language learning practices were performed independently, voluntarily, and purposefully to empower their language skills, and this made them view themselves as autonomous English language learners.

### ***c. Freedom in learning***

To begin with, the current theme being discussed implied political implications that made it different from the previous interpretations of learner autonomy. In this regard, two interviewees explained that learner autonomy implies values of freedom. Interviewee (13) from the second case study and interviewee (5) from the first one interpreted the concept of learner autonomy as having the right to learn and to share one's opinion. Learner autonomy in this aspect is interpreted in a more political way, which focuses on the issue of authority between students and teachers in their academic context. Interviewee (13) narrated an incident with one of his teachers where autonomy was not welcomed. He said:

I suggested to a teacher that I do a research, which that was me being autonomous, so he asked, ok what is the topic about and I said, teachers' competence and incompetence at university. And could you imagine what our teacher's reaction was, he didn't like it one bit. He thought I was throwing shades at him, or I was insinuating something that wasn't there, and he said who are you to suggest such thing.

#### **Student Interviewee 13, Case (2)**

The interviewee in the quote above was prevented from doing research on a topic that the teacher did not like. To the interviewee, the fact that he decided to do research is itself an act of autonomy. However, the concept of autonomy here transcends to the level of challenging teachers and taking risks in deciding what to research. Learner autonomy in this situation is approached from its most basic political liberatory meaning, where autonomy indicates rebellion and standing up for one's own rights in deciding what to learn rather than following a teacher's or a tutor's lead. The same interviewee stood for the same interpretation of

learner autonomy when asked about his role as a student in his academic learning context, he said:

Yeah, I think if you have the liberty to say something in the classroom which you are entirely entitled to because you are a university student. You can say anything as long as it is not disruptive or inappropriate, then you are being autonomous and encouraged. I think I am autonomous, whenever I felt like the need to say something inside the classroom, I just say it. Because to me I need to put myself out there to learn.

#### **Student Interviewee 13, Case (2)**

Again, the interviewee in the quote above defined the concept of learner autonomy as having the freedom to share his opinion inside the classroom. To him, being autonomous means practising his right to express his opinions freely. The interviewee also regards this as an efficient way to learn and to develop his intellect by starting debates with others, which also seems to connect to the previous theme about being actively engaged inside the classroom. A very similar view of learner autonomy was presented by interviewee (5) from the first case study. When describing his learning experience at university, which he considered autonomous, he said:

... teachers nowadays actually allow you to involve yourself within this discussion and enrich your knowledge, this is a form of autonomy. You are volunteering to experience or to get new information and to give new information.

#### **Student Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

Interviewee (5) in the quote above acknowledged that he is free to discuss and share information inside the classroom and that he is not obliged to do anything by force. Both interviewees (13) and (5) approach the concept of learner autonomy from its very basic liberatory meaning. In their explanation, learner autonomy is not about the process of learning itself, like independently doing research or relying on oneself to learn the English language. In other words, learner autonomy here is not concerned with pedagogical practices, rather with a question of authority and a political dilemma where students operate freely under the teachers' supervision.

When reflecting on the themes which emerged so far in the students' data it can be noted that the concept of learner autonomy is majorly associated with the outside classroom whether the learning goal is academic or beyond the academic context. Students' contextualised interpretations of learner autonomy do not seem to differ much from their initial explanation "the ability to learn by oneself", except in the last theme identified where autonomy in learning was addressed as a right to pursue knowledge rather a pedagogical practice of how to pursue that knowledge. With that being said, I shall bring to light the students' interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy within the classroom context which most of whom avoided talking about in their explanations of what learner autonomy means.

#### **4.4.3. Classroom learner autonomy**

During the interviews, it was noted that students tended to explain more about the outside classroom context when answering any of learner autonomy related questions. Therefore, it was intriguing to ask about what they understand by "learner autonomy" when put in the classroom context. The classroom context was regarded as controversial because it is neither a place for students to do research nor a place to practice any of their unconventional language learning activities. Moreover, there is the presence of the teacher, who also has authority over the classroom that he/she manages.

Students' data about learner autonomy within the classroom context was a response to several questions that addressed learner autonomy in this context. Students were asked questions about the meaning of learner autonomy to them inside the classroom and the learning roles they assume inside the classroom. The students were also asked about what makes them think that they are autonomous learners in the classroom context. Students gave various responses to these investigations. Eight interviewees perceived themselves as autonomous learners inside the classroom, and they supported their views with examples, which I shall present shortly. However, the vast majority of participants said that the concept of learner autonomy does not make any sense to them in a place where they cannot do research. The interviewees' responses are categorised into the following sub-themes:

##### ***a. Learner autonomy conflicts with classroom context***

Students had strong beliefs about learner autonomy as associated with researching the academic content they study and using unconventional language learning materials.

Therefore, it was difficult for them to connect this concept to an environment where they could neither do independent research nor practice their language skills independently. Most students (14 students) were not able to make any connection between the concept of learner autonomy and the classroom context. Five of those students clearly indicated that learner autonomy does not make sense to them inside the classroom. They justified their answers with the following:

I think the setting of the classroom conflicts with the concept of autonomy because when you are in the classroom you are automatically subject to what the teacher says so you are obliged to listen and to pay attention to what they say, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to me to be autonomous inside the classroom.

**Student Interviewee 10, Case (2)**

Because the teacher would be there so there would not be any learner autonomy because you will be listening to the teacher and following the teacher, and me personally when there is a teacher in front of me, I would follow him, I would not ignore him and not listen to his lecture it is part of my responsibility to follow the teacher. So, learner autonomy inside the classroom would not make any sense to me

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

According to the sample interviewees in the quotes above, the classroom context does not allow for autonomy. The interviewees referred to their main roles as listeners and receivers of information, and these roles conflict with the idea of independent action, which they used to express their autonomy earlier in this study. In other words, autonomy that does not involve researching or ameliorating one's language skills according to one's preferences does not seem to make sense to the interviewees. Although most students supported this view, others in both case studies acknowledged that learner autonomy exists within the classroom context. Findings from these studies are presented in the following two themes:

***b. Listening and critical thinking***

Unlike the previous view, which refuted the idea of learner autonomy within the classroom, six interviewees affirmed that autonomy could happen in that highly and intensely formal context. The interviewees justified their view by relating autonomous learning to the efforts



they make inside the classroom to understand the lessons delivered to them. In other words, students would be reaching for knowledge not necessarily by doing research but by being highly conscious of their studies, being mentally present, and critically thinking about the information presented to them. They said:

In your head as a learner, you have this all brainstorming going, and this whole bubble of thoughts and ideas towards that information. this is completely independent from the teacher and the class, that is for me autonomy, even if not shared with the teacher or even if the whole things not completely correct it would still be considered autonomy, even if you are making mistakes inside of your head but you are evolving thoughts and I would consider that autonomy.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

Here it is all about that exposure to new ideas and working out your mind to understand the lesson as one should, in some way with the assistance of your teacher but you as a student are doing mental processes on your own and accepting responsibility in the classroom as a student, so it is different than being autonomous outside the classroom. So, inside the classroom you are developing new ideas and information by yourself and also with the help of the teacher.

**Student interviewee 4, Case (1)**

But I think learner autonomy is not only about research but also about critical thinking, like, you are doing research, but you are thinking about it critically, to become autonomous in a critical way you actually judge, give opinion and you investigate the knowledge then present that knowledge to other people and compare it to their autonomous learning outcomes to see what you are missing and what you don't.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (1)**

The interviewees' autonomy within the classroom was envisaged in their active role as responsibly critical thinkers who are conscious of their learning. In all the quotes above, the interviewees show that learner autonomy is not only a research-related process, but it is also a mental process that involves having the ability to think outside the box, questioning and reflecting on the information they study even when not sharing their thoughts out and loud.

Although critical thinking is not strictly occurring inside the classroom, the classroom context gives students more chances to be provoked to think critically and constructively.

With reference to the mental efforts that the interviewees highlighted in their interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy in this formal educational context, students also referred to their vital role as listeners inside the classroom. The interviewees regarded the classroom environment as a place for them to learn new information and receive the guidance they needed to do research. Therefore, they mentioned that it is an act of autonomy to stay focused and willingly pay attention to teachers inside the classroom. Although only four interviewees considered this as an act of autonomy, all interviewees reported their role inside the classroom in listening to their teachers, they said:

I think ideally, a student is supposed to listen to what the teacher has to say pick up on the advice and their guidance and then continue the work on your own but again take teachers' advice inside the classroom.

**Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

I listen to the teachers very carefully, because sometimes they give us very important terminology, and some are very ambiguous. I take notes most of the time because from these notes I am going to base my research on the small data I am given in the classroom.

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

While listening to teachers might seem like an act of passivity inside the classroom, the interviewee (8) from the second case and three others described listening as an act of autonomy. Perhaps the remaining students did not have the same realisation about listening, but they all asserted that it is highly important to pay attention to what their instructors have to say. The students-interviewees frequently referred to their roles as listeners inside the classroom. For instance, Interviewee (3) from the first case study mentioned that one should master the art of listening and that students do not have to always take part in or make comments on everything inside the classroom, especially since teachers are subject experts, which makes them a valid and valuable source of information, yet not the only one. Students' listening to their teachers inside the classroom and following their lead about maximising

learning also becomes an act of autonomy if made with volition and out of their sense of responsibility toward what they study and not as a strategy to escape learning responsibilities.

In the end, this interpretation of learner autonomy was portrayed as mainly receptive, internal mental learning processes. This view might seem reductionist to the concept of learner autonomy, which the majority of students associate with being independent and actively engaging in learning activities. However, it is a view that is akin to the concept of learner autonomy, especially in this case where students are aware of the importance of having critical thinking skills and listening to teachers, which are two activities they volitionally and purposefully do to improve their learning in a highly restrictive academic context.

Of course, listening to teachers is not always an act of autonomy, and it is not favourable in all situations. Listening could also be a manifestation of laziness on the students' part, or maybe, from a psychological perspective, listening could entail a lack of confidence from students who might feel ashamed or uncomfortable having their voices heard inside the classroom. Another proposition was made by interviewee (2) from the first case study, who said that listening to teachers is a sign of respect. He said:

I listen to what my teachers actually want to say, so I respect their way to teaching and their methods, but I do not always take them as my only learning sources and way of learning I like to have my own strategies of learning. I have my own unique way I understand stuff, so I just grasp whatever information we are studying then I try to reformulate it in my own way

#### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

The interviewee in the quote above noted that he listens to his teachers because he respects them. However, the interviewee followed up by saying that although he listens to what the teachers have to say, he does not rely on them as the only source of knowledge. In other words, the interviewee relocates his quest for knowledge from the classroom to an outside classroom context where previous interpretations of learner autonomy apply, as described in earlier sections.

Listening to teachers and critical thinking are considered more of a cognitive manifestation through which students interpret their understanding of learner autonomy in this context. In that regard, other observable autonomous learning endeavours were noted by the students-

participants and informed their interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy in the confined classroom context.

***c. Active participation inside the classroom***

Autonomy is often recognised through observable learning behaviours. Therefore, besides the mental processes that students perceived as an aspect of learner autonomy, a theme about students' active participation inside the classroom emerged from the interviewees' data. Students' active engagement inside the classroom includes engaging in discussions, solving problems, and sharing opinions. This was noted by six interviewees, who clearly stated that these were autonomous learning behaviours. Knowing that the classroom is a place where students receive and build upon their knowledge, the interviewees indicated that learner autonomy in this context is related to taking part in the making of that knowledge. They said:

...the teacher is there, and the only way learner autonomy would exist is through the communicative approach which is students centred. by adding to the discussion inside the classroom, or through some sort of group work in which they exchange knowledge with each other without the interference of the teacher

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (1)**

Ok, through debate... teachers nowadays actually allow you to involve yourself within this discussion and enrich your knowledge, this is a form of autonomy.

**Student Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

If we talk about the classroom environment, I see that the learner can be autonomous by depending on himself in finding solutions for problems and in answering questions and doing all necessary to understand the lesson

**Student Interviewee 11, Case (2)**

According to the students in the quotes above, active involvement inside the classroom by solving problems, making efforts to understand the lesson, and enriching the classroom discussion is one way for students to be autonomous. However, what makes these learning activities autonomous is that they are self-initiated by learners who willingly decide to engage in them. The same interviewees added that it is their role to take notes, participate in debates, team up with their classmates, and present their research when asked. In other words, they

need to be actively involved in the classroom context. This is presented in the following excerpt by the interviewee (9) who said:

Well, inside the classroom basically, I take notes, skimming and scanning documents we are given to us, this can be done inside and outside the classroom, as well as following the teacher, understanding, participating in the debates, and extensions of thoughts and discussions, teamwork you know pairing and sharing with other students, giving observations. And yeah, mostly inside the classroom, presentations when we are asked to.

#### **Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

Students' above-mentioned activities are done willingly and without being told to by their teachers. Students reported that they are mindfully present in the classroom and make efforts to understand the lesson by engaging in discussions. All these are viewed as autonomous learning activities since they were self-initiated and reflect their sense of responsibility for their learning. Although students seem to refer to their critical active role in all the activities reported, they do not seem to cancel the role of the teacher as a managerial authority inside the classroom. Moreover, not all students' participation inside the classroom is an act of autonomy, as there are situations where students may speak or even share their opinions only to disrupt their fellow students and the flow of the lesson. Therefore, the students' intention behind their participation inside the classroom is important to determine whether it is an act of autonomy or not.

The current section in this chapter is about the multiple interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy that occurred within/beyond the classroom context to serve different learning goals. This section might seem to have driven a wedge between learner autonomy outside and within the classroom. However, the students' and interviewees' perceptions of their learners' autonomy seem to be interactive between the two contexts. Students mentioned on several occasions that they are the kind of learners who will continue to learn when their teaching stops. So, to them, although learner autonomy practices differ depending on the context and the learning goals, autonomy itself is more about doing what works best for their learning in whatever form it takes, whether in learning the language, the academic content, or beyond that. In this respect, they said:

In my opinion, being an autonomous learner is actually a lifestyle. It is not about being inside or outside the classroom, it is about how you want to grasp the information

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Don't disconnect what you learn inside the classroom with what you learn outside the classroom. if you do this, I think you will be more independent and have more awareness to be responsible

**Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

As the quotes above entail, autonomous learning for students is a continuity between what they do and the knowledge they learn within and outside the classroom. Therefore, not considering one of these learning contexts would present an incomplete image of the investigated concept. Questionnaire respondents presented similar views when asked about the context in which they think their academic performance is mostly influenced; their responses were as follows:

Table 13

*The context where students' academic performance is mostly influenced*

	<b>Case (1)/ (University A)</b>		<b>Case (2)/ (University B)</b>	
Inside the classroom	6	13%	09	18%
Outside the classroom	10	23%	12	25%
Both equally	29	64%	29	57%
Total	45	100	50	100%

As the table above entails, a majority of 64% and 57% of students in cases (1) and (2) believe that their academic growth depends equally on both inside and outside classroom learning efforts. Such findings confirm the views of the interviewees, thereby adding both validity and generalizability to the data that represents the main population from which the questionnaire samples were taken.

Before moving to the next section, I believe it is important to note that students-interviewees responses seemed to shift in descriptions and interpretations of learner autonomy. This shift was noted in the transition between within/beyond classroom learning and across learning goals, as in learning the English language, the academic content, and pursuing personal learning goals. Such realisations about students' responses talk about the complexity of the

concept of learner autonomy and how multiple interpretations of the same context can melt into one another. This shall be further elaborated in the discussion chapter. Having said this, I shall now bring attention to the practices and characteristics that students attributed to themselves as autonomous learners. Students' responses in this section reinforce and inform the previous interpretations of learner autonomy and support them with more evidence.

#### **4.5. Students' learner autonomy related practices in their academic context**

Investigating the practices that students related to learner autonomy was another way to reveal how and in what ways they see themselves as autonomous learners in their academic context. Data from students-interviewees presented two major themes about students' autonomous learning practices. Namely, *autonomous language learning practices* and *autonomous academic content learning practices*. Each of these themes will be supported with quotes from the interviews with students alongside statistical data from the questionnaire about learner autonomy related practices that concerned the student sample of this research.

##### **4.5.1. Autonomous language learning practices**

Students have already stressed that they are autonomous language learners, most of them since their early childhood, because they have always been deliberately and volitionally engaged in English language learning practices. Although much of the practices reported were not formal or academic, they considered them as the most influential on their language development, which to them is an autonomous language learning experience. They said:

My friends always ask me how I became competent in English, and I answer by watching movies and listening to music

##### **Student Interviewee 8, Case (1)**

Yeah of course, songs I listen to are in English, movies are in English, the news I watch, and articles are in English, so I am really in contact with the language so yeah. It is very important part of my daily life.

##### **Student Interviewee 12, Case (2)**

If you mean how I act on my language skills, well, when it comes to that I think I do a lot of reading, relevant and irrelevant to my study topics. I am also a writer. I always speak English with my group of friends who are fluent English speakers. I

join some servers or native speakers and sometimes have conversations that help me perfect my pronunciation and learn new words, and the dialect and all.

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

I read books, novels, I read approximately one book in two weeks, I watch series, I watch K drama with English subtitles. I watch movies too; I write in English as well. In general, I revise my lessons on daily basis and do research as well.

**Student Interviewee 6, Case (2)**

Students no longer consider themselves learning English because the latter is used in their daily life. This is apparent when speaking with friends, listening to music, watching movies, and when reading and researching about their academic domains. Therefore, to them, English is more of a lifestyle. On that account, the interviewees noted that these daily practices improve their language skills and keep them in touch with the language.

The questionnaire data also consisted of similar informal language learning practices which appeared to match what the interviewees had said. This presented a case where the large questionnaire sample validated the data generated for the interviews. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity to explore the level to which students are engaged with those language learner autonomy activities, as indicated in the table below:

Table 14  
*Students' autonomous language learning practices*

Statements in the questionnaire	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
12 I reasonably organise my time to learn English	3.51	1.14	3.52	0.29
13 I can transfer and use my language skills in different contexts	3.93	0.87	4.04	0.88
14 I learn English even with the little materials I have	4.53	0.66	4.27	0.86
15 I use different strategies when learning English	4.26	0.88	4.38	0.71
16 I learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc ...	4.55	0.89	4.71	0.60
18 I use my own ways to learn English vocabulary	4.37	0.91	4.50	1.67
20 I use English when watching movies, listening to music or on social media	4.33	0.87	4.58	0.72
24 I am aware of my language areas of strengths and weaknesses	4.48	0.62	4.29	0.72
27 I try to be creative in the way I learn and practice English	4.13	0.86	3.96	1.12



30	I take chances to speak in English and communicate my thoughts	4.71	0.72	4.49	0.79
31	I enjoy learning English	4.28	0.86	4.06	0.89
33	I learn English better independently	4.17	0.96	4.46	0.75
37	I am involved in English language clubs and association	1.97	1.28	2.77	1.42

The students in the questionnaire rated how often they practised the language learning activities suggested in the table above, many of which were also highlighted by the interviewees. The format of the students' responses was from 1, which indicates a practice that had never been done by students, to 5, which signifies a practice that is always performed by them. However, before starting any of the analysis, I would like to bring attention once more to the generally similar findings between the two case studies in all the proposed statements. This evidence justifies my choice of presenting the two case studies jointly to avoid repetition. In that regard, a full report of questionnaire data is attached in **Appendix 13** and **Appendix 14**, in which more similarities in data between the two chosen institutions could be found.

To begin with, English language learning practices that had a direct impact on students' language learning resulted in a very high mean. For instance, learning English from music and movies was at a mean of 4.55 and 4.71 in university (A) and (B) respectively. Also, in statement (33) in the table above, students were asked if they learn English better independently. Students in both universities (A) and (B) scored a very high mean of 4.17 and 4.46 respectively. Students' responses in both cases remained consistent for their high means across all proposed statements like enjoying learning English, being creative in learning English, taking chances to speak in English, using different strategies to learn English, and learning English regardless of the scarcity of learning materials.

The questionnaire findings only indicated one activity in which students' mean was below 3 in both cases, which is involving oneself in English language clubs and associations. In this regard, students' responses in university (B) were slightly lighter at a rate of 2.77 than their counterparts at university (A) whose mean was at 1.97. To begin with, this is another indicator for the high similarities in responses for students in both universities in the sense that students did not only show similar responses in the practices that they do, but they also showed similarities in those practices that they do not do. Nonetheless, deciding not to

involve oneself in English language clubs and association is not an indicator of less autonomy, especially since students' responses were positive to most of the suggested autonomous learning practices proposed. Moreover, students' disengagement with English language clubs and association could be due to the lack of such opportunities, or perhaps students have found other more efficient alternatives to learn the English language. In addition, the practices suggested to students are only inspired by the literature about what others see as an act of language learner autonomy. Moreover, autonomy entails freedom of action, students are free to choose their own learning activities without being forced into activities that they do not appreciate. It is for such reason the questionnaire items also investigated students' openness to using different language learning strategies which resulted in a high mean at 4.26 and 4.38 for case (1) and (2) respectively. The questionnaire items also involved a statement that investigated how often students using their own ways to learn English vocabulary. In this regard, Students' responses in university (A) and (B) scored a high mean of 4.37 and 4.50 as demonstrated in Table 14.

Although the similarities in results between the two research samples are clear, using Microsoft Excel, a T-test was conducted to examine if there is any statistical significance between the students' responses in the two universities. The T-test results, in which the overall mean scores of the two case studies were compared (see Table 14), presented a P value of 0.80. This result is greater than the estimated 0.05 alpha value that was calculated as the threshold for statistical significance. Consequently, this means that we can accept the null hypothesis that says there is no statistical difference in the variances between the two research groups.

One of the conclusions that could be drawn based on the findings from the students' responses in the questionnaire and the T-test results is that it is possible to infer that students' autonomous language learning practices are consistent across the main population from which the sample of this research was taken in both universities. This is particularly noted in the substantial similarities between the two groups of students' responses about autonomous language learning practices. Therefore, by extension, all masters' degree students based in the department of English at the two selected universities have similar language learning practices to the sample of this research.

The findings from the questionnaire confirmed the interviewees' suggested practices that they associated with learner autonomy. To them, learning English through music, movies, and reading are the most frequently practised activities and apparently the most effective given their confidence in their language skills. In the end, students argued that the reported learning materials and practices have had and still have a great role in improving their language skills in a type of learning that they regard as autonomous. Having explained this, the coming section presents the other direction for learner autonomy practices which are derived from students' goals about learning the academic content that they study.

#### **4.5.2. Autonomous academic content learning practices**

Being autonomous in learning the academic content that makes part of the students' degree was noted to be of importance to students, especially to those who prioritize their role in doing research and enriching their knowledge in their academic domains over learning the language. Students mentioned several practices which they associated with learner autonomy. These practices were described in their previous interpretations of the concept and re-emerged when asked about what it is that they do in relation to autonomy in their academic content learning. They said:

I ask for the programme of the module from my teachers... I also prepare all my lessons before I go there (classroom) so I have an idea during the class.

##### **Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

Mostly you have to do research by yourself, of course you are going to need a curriculum and a syllabus but mostly you need to do research and develop your own way of learning.

##### **Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

But first it is related to during the classroom because that's how you get your information first. And that's how you are guided, and then it is about how you decide to revise it at home.

##### **Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

Also, when it comes to the classroom we must sit at the very front and pay attention to what the teacher is giving us of information and interact with teachers and ask them question about anything we haven't understood.

### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

I listen to the teachers very carefully, because sometimes they give us very important terminology, and some are very ambiguous. I take notes most of the time because from these notes I am going to base my research on the small data I am given in the classroom.

### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

The students' interviewees gave many examples about what makes them autonomous as specialised academic content learners. These examples are mainly rounded in two aspects: the first is doing research about what they study. Such research occurs before and after the lessons are delivered. In other words, students prepare for their lessons beforehand, and they expand that knowledge after taking the lesson from teachers. In this case, research may or may not be a reaction to the teachers' advice for students to further their knowledge. The second learning activity that students associate with learner autonomy is paying attention to teachers. This is often associated with the students' passivity, but in this context, students consider it their role and an act of autonomy and responsibility to pay attention to teachers. Listening and paying attention to what teachers have to say about the lesson were mentioned by seven interviewees who highly emphasised this role within the classroom. In this regard, Interviewee (3) from the first case study mentioned that one should master the art of listening and that students do not have to always take part or make comments on everything inside the classroom, especially since teachers are subject experts, which makes them a valid and valuable source of information, yet not the only one. Students' listening to their teachers inside the classroom and following their lead about maximising learning also becomes an act of autonomy as long as it is made with volition and out of their responsibility for their education.

Just like autonomous language learning related practices, the questionnaire addressed to students also involved some practices that are related to the academic knowledge that students have gained in their formal education. Questionnaire data presented an opportunity to explore more practices and validate those suggested by the interviewees. The suggested autonomous academic learning practices addressed to the questionnaire respondents are as entailed in the table below.

Table 15  
*Students' autonomous academic content learning practices*

Statements in the questionnaire	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1 I decide the topic of my project work (exposé)	3.93	0.88	3.87	0.91
2 I make learning/teaching suggestions to my teachers	2.73	1.00	2.55	1.08
3 I see my teachers as guiders and facilitators to my learning	4.13	0.91	3.44	1.03
5 I willingly take notes and write all my lessons	4.44	0.88	3.98	0.99
9 I attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory	4.11	1.15	3.70	1.18
10 I do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory	3.23	1.14	3.27	1.07
11 I look for the topic of the coming lesson and I prepare myself for it	3.00	1.10	3.04	1.44
17 I read books, articles, etc... without being told to	3.75	1.39	4.15	0.81
21 I enrich my knowledge about lessons which I have not understood	3.90	0.91	4.02	1.13
29 I am always ready to increase my knowledge and learn more about different things	4.13	1.09	4.20	0.98
35 I share what I have learnt with others	2.02	1.26	2.11	1.32
36 I participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom	3.72	1.22	3.83	1.09

To begin with, the similarities in students' findings continue between the two universities; however, some differences in data were noted. The questionnaire respondents were asked several questions related to learning the academic content that they study. For instance, students were asked how often they 1) decide the topic of their project work, and 2) do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory, their responses to these statements were at a mean of 3.93 and 3.87, and 3.23 and 3.27 for university (A) and (B) respectively. These means are relatively low in comparison to students' responses concerning how frequently they engage in language learning activities. In other statements, students were asked how often they 1) look for the topic of the coming lesson and prepare for it, and 2) participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom. Students' responses in universities (A) and (B) for the preceding two statements were at a mean of 3 and 3.04, and 3.83 and 3.72. Again,

these means are nowhere near those means that students scored about the language learning practices that they do.

The data shows some occasions where discrepancies were noted between students' responses at the two universities. For instance, when students were asked how often they read books and articles without being told to, a mean of 3.75 and 4.15 was reached in the first and second case studies, respectively. Other differences in data between the two universities were noted in statements like perceiving teachers as guiders and facilitators, willingly taking notes and writing the lessons, and attending lectures, although they are not compulsory. As for the lowest means that were identified in students' data, it was in two statements: 1) making learning/teaching suggestions to teachers, and 2) sharing information with others. In each of these statements, a low mean of less than (3) was scored for students at both universities. The proposed statements entail that students are not involved in making critical classroom decisions about their learning and are not excited to share information with one another.

When the results from the two groups of students were compared (using Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances T-test) the overall difference between University (A) and university (B) students' means were at 3.59 and 3.51 respectively. These scores were not statistically significant as the P value of 0.78 was found to be greater than the alpha value of 0.05. Nonetheless, when comparing the questionnaire data presented in Table 14 about language learning and in Table 15 about academic learning practices using a paired item T-test, the scores of the test were found to be statistically significant. In other words, a P value of 0.003 and 0.001 was found when comparing means from university (A) and (B) respectively. In both cases the P value that was found was lower than the estimated alpha value of 0.05. The discrepancy in findings between language learning and academic content learning practices is justified by five students who consider learner autonomy in their academic content as challenging in comparison to autonomous language learning. In this regard, interviewee (8) said:

Once you get better at it (English language), you will be moving to other challenges which is your speciality like doing research and focus on study skills. Because at the level of masters you are not here to learn basic conversational skills, you need

to focus on your speciality because in this context the languages a pre-requisite and a priority

### **Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

Overall, students' practices which were divided into language learning and academic content learning corresponded to the interpretations and the characteristics of autonomous learners indicated by students in earlier stages of this research. Once again, doing research did not only prove to be one of the characteristics of autonomous learners for the students-sample but also one of the major practices based on which learner autonomy was interpreted. Although the interviewees' findings agreed on the suggested items in the questionnaire about the importance of listening inside the classroom, the questionnaire showed that more students welcomed the idea of doing research after the lessons are delivered than preparing for the lessons beforehand. On a different note, the statistical findings discussed above could be inferred to the whole population of students from which the questionnaire respondents were sampled, especially that the similarities between students' responses across universities were significantly consistent except for some few differences that were previously highlighted. Therefore, it would be safe to say students based in the department of English, particularly those at the master's degree level, engage more with language learning activities in comparison to the academic content knowledge that they study. This is for the obvious reason that interviewee (8) noted above, which is that English in their context is a means of communication, hence, students would not be effectively doing research if they had not achieved a satisfactory level of English language proficiency.

Before moving to the next section, which discusses learner autonomy characteristics that students attribute to themselves, I shall refer to the bidirectional learner autonomy practices presented above. Indeed, students' interpretations of learner autonomy were placed in several settings within and beyond the classroom context and were meant to serve different learning goals, which were identified as personal, academic content-related, and language related. However, when asked about the practices that students associated with learner autonomy in their educational context, their learning goals polarised between language learning and academic content learning. Therefore, once again, the goals that students aimed to achieve played a critical role in defining what practices of learner autonomy they adhered to.

#### **4.6. Students' perceptions of the characteristics of the autonomous learner**

Students in both case studies seem to agree on some characteristics based on which autonomous learners can be identified. These characteristics resonated with the practices associated with language learning and academic content learning, as reported in the proceeding section. However, they were also broad in the sense that they transcended the bidirectional categorizations of context and goal-oriented interpretations of learner autonomy. In other words, students' responses generally fell into two categories of characteristics, the first one described the proactive learning tendencies of students, and the second category included all personal characteristics that they referred to themselves as autonomous students. On that account, the following two themes emerged:

##### **4.6.1. Proactive learning behaviour**

Proactive learning developed as a major theme in the students' data. When they were asked what makes them think that they are autonomous learners, nine students noted that they engage in learning activities without being told to. The students-interviewees gave several examples of their proactive learning behaviour, which reflects their agency in learning situations. This was described in the following excerpts:

For example, if the teacher is not giving me much, the teachers is not giving me what I need I would go and download articles, I would go and search on YouTube for videos that tackle the topic, I would, I don't know, for example there is difficult words or concepts that I could not understand so I would go and search for these words in my dictionary

##### **Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

For instance, now I am developing an app of translating Idioms. I think this is autonomous because the teacher doesn't teach us how to develop and app, so it was my choice, it is my personal project which has nothing to do with my teachers, but I just thought it would be interesting to have an app which translates idioms, so I am doing it. I think these are examples of autonomy that I have.

##### **Student Interviewee 12, Case (2)**

In the quotes above, students demonstrated the importance of engaging in self-initiative work. To them, what made them autonomous is their sense of agency in learning, which



developed to engagement in more proactive learning. In other words, students do not need to be told to study, read, or develop their knowledge or skills. As active agents and responsible learners, they recognise their roles and engage in learning activities without being urged to do it. In the end, while proactive learning reflected the action of learning itself which helped students characterise themselves as autonomous, the following section sheds some light on the psychological characteristics that students described as relevant to what makes autonomous students.

#### **4.6.2. Personal characteristics**

Students identified themselves as autonomous learners in a variety of contexts, like inside and outside the classroom, in learning the English language, in learning the academic content, and in pursuing their personal learning interests beyond the classroom. The students-interviewees suggested various characteristics that they believe have helped them in their learning, which they earlier described as autonomous. They said:

Yeah well, I think that I am a very persistent and focused and also, I am organised person when it comes to my learning

**Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Yeah, I think I am very focused when I have my eyes on something, I have to achieve it I have a strong will and I do not mind sharing my information from other people and at the same time I learn from them

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

I think what make me an autonomous learner is that fact that I am very competitive, when I see someone challenging me, I don't know. I like challenges. so, I like to put bets then I tell myself see I did it. So, I like challenges and I am very competitive.

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

Mostly curiosity and the interest in reading and learning new things

**Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

I am passionate over English I love the language so when you love something you are going to do whatever makes you reach the thing that you love.

### **Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

As indicated in the quotes above, students mentioned several personality traits like persistence, passion, and competitiveness, which they correlated with learning autonomously. Just like proactive learning, which was described as a general value related to learner autonomy, the personal characteristics that the interviewees mentioned followed the same path. For instance, characteristics like curiosity, appreciation for challenge and competitiveness, and motivation are trans-contextual traits that students attribute to themselves when pursuing any academic or non-academic learning goal. Therefore, the interviewees also gave examples of themselves being focused and persistent, not only in learning but also in everything else in their lives. Such findings from students also speak for their understanding of learner autonomy as a concept that is very much tied to the personal characteristics of individuals. In this regard, students' personal characteristics emerged as prominent themes when investigating the factors that influence students' autonomous learning practices which are presented in the following section.

#### **4.7. Factors influencing students' autonomous learning practices**

As indicated in earlier sections, students' autonomous learning practices were recognised in learning the English language and in learning the formal academic content that students have. These two diverse types of practices informed and resonated with the factors influencing them as found in the students' data. This re-confirms the importance of learning goals that direct students' interpretations of learner autonomy and eventually their reported autonomous learning practices.

Before presenting any of the findings in this section, it is important to note that the factors that were found to have an impact on students' autonomous language/academic content learning do not seem to impact all students in the same way or to the same degree. In other words, what might be regarded as highly impactful and determinative in autonomous learning for someone may not have the same weight for another. Therefore, there is no rule to classify them according to their level of impact on students since every individual could be a different case.

##### **4.7.1. Factors influencing students' autonomous academic content learning**

During the interviews with students, they were asked about the factors that influence their autonomous learning. The responses from the interviews resulted in four factors that students in both case studies reported as the following:

***a. Teachers' classroom practices***

Although learner autonomy implies a sense of detachment from teachers, which is what both students and teachers indicated in their interpretations of the concept, a great deal of autonomous behaviour depends on teachers' roles and how they manage their classrooms, which is what the student-interviewees indicated. To begin with, when students were asked about the factors that influence their autonomous learning, they primarily mentioned their teachers. For instance, interviewees (4) and (3) said:

I was also blessed with teachers that emphasized on the thoughts of autonomy; they always tell us don't only rely on us.

**Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

you know there is something, I have been studying for 5 years at university and it always the same famous sentence that all teaches use "I am here to guide you, I am here to instruct you, I am not here to spoon-feed you or to teach you everything" so you would know that it is your duty to search for information and not to completely rely and depend on the teachers. They are always saying this and that formed my perception of what autonomy is at university. which is a good thing to be honest.

**Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

The interviewees' responses show how impactful the role of teachers is in preaching learner autonomy in their classroom, which is what teachers themselves demonstrated when asked about their roles as promoters for the concept of learner autonomy, as shall be illustrated in the teachers' findings. The managerial role of teachers inside the classroom is of great importance for students who previously interpreted learner autonomy as having the freedom to express opinions and in being actively engaged inside the classroom. Therefore, it is also the teachers' responsibility to allow space and time for asking questions and having debates. However, in the absence of such freedom of self-expression and to exchange and challenge

ideas inside the classroom, students would relapse to being passive receivers of knowledge, which is the case that interviewee (5) reported:

Yeah, well sometimes with some teachers you cannot raise a debate over something because the teacher remains a teacher, and the learner remains a learner.

#### **Student Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

The impactful role of teachers illustrated above was at the level of classroom management. However, that is not the only role assigned to teachers inside the classroom. Students do not only view their teachers as knowledge facilitators but also as knowledge providers. Therefore, the impact of teachers' practices can extend to the amount of information they provide to their students. Nine interviewees reported that the research they do outside the classroom depends on how much information they are given by their teachers inside the classroom. In this regard, interviewee (3) said:

It depends on the teacher, sometimes teachers give you the right information and extra information and that should be enough but sometimes when the teacher doesn't give you the whole package, then you have to make research on your own. Sometimes I am happy doing this kind of study related research but sometimes I feel overwhelmed so I would want the teacher to give me what is necessary, the information I need.

#### **Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

Indeed, students repeatedly acknowledged their roles as knowledge seekers by doing research outside the classroom. However, the research they did was not always interesting and engaging. In that regard, despite their positive attitude towards doing research, students appreciated those teachers who gave them all the information they needed for the exams and to get their desired grades. Therefore, extending their knowledge beyond the classroom would be more of an interest than a necessity. The arguments presented in this section show that teachers can either be enablers for students' autonomous learning by providing proper guidance and boosting students' motivation, or they can hinder students' autonomous learning and that is by spoon-feeding students and aborting attempts of self-expression and debating inside the classroom. Nonetheless, autonomous learners would not be limited by

the approach that teachers use as an excuse to not develop their language skills or not to deepen their knowledge about the subjects that they study.

***b. Motivating factors***

Students recognised that autonomy is more than a set of practices; it also entails psychological features that can impact the students' learning behaviour. When students were asked about the factors that helped them become autonomous learners, they did not hesitate to refer directly or indirectly to the psychological drive that enabled them to do research and act proactively towards their learning. This psychological drive was expressed in various ways, like having the motivation, the curiosity, and the interest in the topics addressed and the lessons they are taught. Students said:

Motivation is what makes autonomy, to be the best, and it is both when motivating myself and when my teachers motivate me to work harder and rely on myself in my studies.

**Student Interviewee 10, Case (1)**

I think what make me an autonomous learner is that fact that I am very competitive, when I see someone challenging me, I don't know. I like challenges

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

because being genuinely interested in something would me that you do further research about which makes you as I said an autonomous learner

**Student Interviewee 11, Case (2)**

The main factor to me is curiosity, I am really curious about learning things, so I am impatient to know and when I am like that, I don't wait for someone to tell me that I have to do it or how I do it. Also, I go search for it by myself. Curiosity is the main factor also motivation has always been a factor too to discover things. I think I always had enough motivation for me to learn

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The quotes above represent a sample of the variety of values that students mentioned to be factors impacting their autonomous learning behaviour. Students mentioned having a sense

of competition, being curious to know more about what they study, and having a genuine interest in the topics discussed. Students also explicitly mentioned motivation as a factor impacting their autonomous learning behaviour. The characteristics mentioned earlier all contribute to the psychological aspect of learner autonomy that give the students the drive to engage in autonomous learning.

### ***c. Language skills***

Students' responses showed that having good language skills are considered a pre-requisite when learning the formal academic content that makes part of their course. In the context of this study, English is not only an end in itself, meaning that the objective of students is not only to improve their language but also to acquire a set of skills and information to graduate with. In this regard, interviewee (8) said:

...because at the level of masters you are not here to learn basic conversational skills, you need to focus on your specialty because in this context the language is a pre-requisite and a priority. Also, English is a means of communication.

#### **Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

To students, the fact that those information and skills are taught in the target language makes English a medium of communication and a means of instruction (EMI). Following this line of thought, having a good command of the language would eventually facilitate the process of doing research, communicating thoughts, and engaging in debates for students, which is how learner autonomy is interpreted in the students' findings in both case studies. In this regard, interviewees (4) and (8) from the second case study said:

Well, first I have to say that university requires intermediate level of English. you already need to be good at English. but in case you are not you would need to interact a lot in English. you will need that unconscious knowledge about the language and if you have that it will help you in understanding lectures and all modules

#### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

I think autonomy comes at an advanced level of English; Once you get better at it, you will be moving to other challenges which is your speciality like doing research and focus on study skills...So language facilitates communication for students to

make something with the language they are studying and at the same time they are enriching their language with new vocabulary and expressions and improving their style

#### **Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

When addressing learner autonomy in the domain of the academic content of students, language skills are more of a requirement for the enactment of autonomous learning behaviour that manifests in doing reflective research and in expressing one's opinion, as indicated in previous sections. In this regard, interviewee (8) in the quote above describes autonomy in learning academic content as more of a transcendence from autonomy in language learning. In other words, a student needs to work on his/her language skills to be able to understand the lessons they study and to communicate using the language of instruction.

#### ***d. Educational environment***

When students were asked if they felt that they had developed a sense of self-reliance and an independent learning attitude in the years they spent at university, all of them said 'Yes'. However, they did not seem to give credit to their educational environment. For this reason, the interviewed students pointed out that they do not feel that it is inviting to learn at university. For instance, interviewee (2) in case (1) noted that one of the reasons he does not go to the library is because of the disrespectful demeanour of some students in the library who talk and laugh, ignoring and distracting those who are actually studying. He said:

So, library feels like a club, people go there and start laughing and talking in a really loud voice and that's disturbing.

#### **Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

The second reason why students did not regard their universities as appealing for learning was the lack of materials and resources. This was noted by both students and teachers in both case studies. Students (14) from Case (2) summarised all the interviewees' comments about the lack of books and technology in both universities. She said:

If there is one word to describe technology in our university it would be absent, there is no technology, there is no WIFI, no data show ready to use, so teachers bring their own personal laptop and contact the administration for the data show

that is impossible to get. and this takes time, and sometimes there is no electricity and there is not even a place to project the slides if you know what I mean. These struggles demotivate you, it is so frustrating, even if you want to learn.

**Student Interviewee 14, Case (2)**

The quote above explains how bad and discouraging the learning conditions are. In a time when everything is digital, the interviewees reported a severe lack of computers, data show projectors, and even occasional electricity disruptions. These conditions do not seem favourable for students' learning. They sometimes demotivate learners when they do not find the books they need, or when they waste time adjusting the projector because it is not pre-installed in the classroom, and there are occasions when there are no projectors to use in the first place. The interviewees showed their frustration with both the classroom and library materials, which they described as non-existent. Very often, students end up buying their own books in light of the limited resources in the library the same library where they cannot walk in its aisles and navigate through its shelves to choose the books they want. Instead, they need to ask a librarian to hand them the books they want. Students could talk non-stop about how disadvantaged their universities are and the countless materials they lack. At the same time, they highly praised technology, which they believe that it should have a very positive impact on students' learning. In this regard, interviewee (14) from case (2) finished by saying:

If we had some technology, it would definitely help, and it would definitely be more interesting for us to learn. I mean even the lighting was bad in the amphitheatre, we sometimes studied in darkness, do you what darkness is, so if they fix that maybe this would motivate it to study

**Student Interviewee 14, Case (2)**

The lack of technology at the universities of students does not seem to support learning in the first place, let alone autonomous learning, which to them requires doing research, technological materials, and digital resources to be able to educate oneself. At the same time, students illustrated that the university is not one big community but consists of small communities that students form. In this regard, students clarified that it is their responsibility to make sure to surround themselves with like-minded people who share the same learning objectives and interests as theirs. They said:



Well, in my university I have a small circle of people who are interested in studying and learning in general. But in general no there is no culture of studying, there is only few people who are really interested and who actually seem to come to university to learn and enjoying the learning process, but most of students come just to attend

**Student Interviewee 11, Case (2)**

Well, I will speak about this only when it comes about me and my group of friends. yeah, we have this culture of learning, but I can't say the same about others.

**Student Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

According to the interviewees in the quotes above, students create their own enclosed groups of like-minded people by choice. Students reported that they often discuss their lessons with their friends, and they help one another learn the language by choice. Students willingly created a positive educational learning environment in an atmosphere that they did not see as encouraging, not only for autonomous learning but for learning in general.

In the end, the limiting educational environment of students urged them to search for other alternative learning materials and opportunities outside the classroom. Students seemed to have adapted to their limiting learning environment, which means that it no longer presented an obstacle for them. As a result, students reported that they do more research outside the classroom by using the internet and any other learning resources at home or wherever available. Eventually, students seemed to have developed coping mechanisms and resilience that encouraged their autonomous learning attitude in an educationally disadvantaged context.

***e. Students' interest in modules and learning tasks***

One of the salient factors that students referred to as impacting their autonomous learning is their interest in the modules and the tasks given to them by their teachers. Students noted that they are more likely to do more research when their learning tasks are interesting. They said:

It depends on the situation sometimes if I like the module, I am going to search for it by my own, I am going to find my own method.

**Student Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

I think I find myself doing this a lot in literature and civilization module. I find myself searching for additional information maybe it is not needed at the moment, but I find myself immersed in that information and I love looking of them.

**Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Yeah, well it depends on the task, if I enjoy the research then I will do more. But if the task is boring then I will just do it for the mark.

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (2)**

Also, it depends on the module. If it is methodology, then I am not interested in it. But if it is about something I like and I am interested in, I would definitely sit in the first row, listen to the teacher, ask questions, take notes, and do more research at home, prepare for the next session you know.

**Student Interviewee 14, Case (2)**

According to all interviewees in the quotes above, students' level of interest in the learning tasks that they do determines how much effort they put into their autonomous learning. In other words, the more interesting students find their modules and their learning tasks, the more likely they are to engage in autonomous learning, which consists of expanding their knowledge on the topics addressed. In line with this thought, interviewee (10) in case (2) referred to the important role that teachers have in presenting the modules in an interesting way so students can engage with them. He said:

Although the modules that students have play a role in enabling students to either work more by doing research or not. The responsibility of making the modules interesting falls back on the shoulders of the teaches

**Student Interviewee 10, Case (2)**

Interviewee (10) in the quote above referred to teachers who do not present their lessons in an interesting way as not qualified. To him, it is part of the research responsibility to make the lessons they teach interesting to capture students' attention, so they are intrigued to do more research about them when the class ends.

**4.7.2. Factors influencing students' autonomous language learning**

Students identified themselves as autonomous language learners in the language practices they do in their daily lives. Students reported that they are motivated and have a positive attitude about the English language. Their responses about the factors that they think influence their language learning were noted to be their supportive English language environment, their interest in the culture of English-speaking communities, personal motivational factors, and the use of technology. The following section shall illustrate these factors:

***a. Supportive English language learning environment***

The students-interviewees mentioned that positioning oneself in an environment where English is frequently used comes in handy for boosting their autonomy in learning the English language. In this vein, the interviewees reported that friends and families have a motivational role in students' autonomous learning in their studies and in learning the English language. However, society was reported to be a discouraging variable for some students' autonomy, while others were neutral about it. These factors are thoroughly explained in the coming subsections.

Friends were frequently addressed as the first and most influential factors in the interviewees' autonomy in learning English. To them, friends provide an opportunity to practise English and are a source of encouragement, especially since most of those friends are also classmates of the interviewees. They said:

As for friends, they are basically the fundamental element behind my learning process... if we took into consideration environment, I believe that the friends I have around me are basically the reason why I keep on improving"

**Student Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

Most of them are my classmates (friends) and most of our conversations are in English language when we talked about trends, movies, politics, all of our conversations are in English even my childhood friends who are not my classmates they also speak English very well.

**Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

Students in this research have explained that language learner autonomy entails ameliorating one's language skills beyond the classroom. In this line of this thought, friends seem to provide support for the students-interviewees to develop of their language skills through the constant use of English when talking about different topics in their conversations. As explained in the two quotes above, friends are the most supportive in boosting the interviewees' autonomy in learning the English language. In a society that is mostly dominated by Arabic and French, but often a mixture of the two, the interviewees seem to have created small communities where likeminded people communicate and share knowledge about studies in the English language.

The interviewees' families also seem to play an important role in supporting students in their language learning and in everything else in life. To the non-working interviewees, family is not only a source of motivation but also financial support which is the case for most Algerians who live with their parents until they find a job to be financially independent. In this regard, interviewee (4) said:

I would say yes, my family was focusing on my studying not English but all the subjects, and when I went to university, he would bring me dictionaries, printer. he is financing my studies. paying for internet at home. buying me a computer and stuff, so yeah family is pretty much encouraging me in my English language learning.

#### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

For me, it stems from my family. Ever since I was a kid, I was told by my mother you need to rely on yourself. no matter how good your teachers are, you need to rely on yourself whenever, you come back home you need to revise and read more.

#### **Student Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

According to the interviewees in the quotes above, the families of the interviewees highly appreciate seeking knowledge, and this value has been nourished in the students ever since they were young. Such upbringing made students make use of opportunities to learn by themselves by revising lessons and engaging in research whenever there is a chance for it.

Society was a point of disagreement amongst the interviewees. When asked if society can be considered as a helpful factor or an obstacle for students' autonomy, the majority of interviewees mainly referred to it as an obstacle. The students-interviewees said:

When it comes to society, English is not very encouraged this goes back to some historical facts, if you speak English in the street, they look at you as an alien or some strange thing. So, speaking French is more normal and acceptable than speaking English.

#### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

Society in Algeria is not Pro-English. Using French outside is for people who are considered civilised probably, while English speakers are considered as arrogant people which are trying to show off their capacities. To them, it is like hey I speak a language that you do not understand. They would think we are gossiping or something.

#### **Student Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

Based on the interviewees' opinions, speaking the English language in Algeria is neither welcomed nor admired. In this regard, society would be limiting students' opportunities to express themselves comfortably in public, hence creating a situation where students' language learner autonomy that is based on language use is not welcomed. However, the views of the study participants about the situation of English in Algeria might be exaggerated, as it does not acknowledge the recent efforts made by the government to promote English or the interest of Algerian youth in this language. Finally, there were some views from the student-participants that demonstrated that they their society no longer negatively affects their autonomous learning process, which is taking place in their enclosed groups of friends and in more virtual spaces online.

#### ***b. Personal factors***

One of the themes that emerged from the interviewees' data about the factors affecting their autonomous learning is just the nature of their characters as individuals and their attitude towards the language they are learning. The interviewees reported that they are passionate, curious, determined, and competitive by nature to learn the English language.

When asked about the factors that they think have influenced their autonomy in learning, the interviewees mentioned some characteristics, which are noted in the following excerpts:

My curiosity and interest in English plays a role and made me want to specialize in this language and expand on it.

**Student Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

My passion for the language made me more persistent and resolute in learning English and learning English in general.

**Student Interviewee 6, Case (2)**

This is a language that I like, and I feel the need that I have to be excellent at it not good or average I have to be excellent because I will need it in my future and to communicate not only with friends or other contacts but also for a job.

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (2)**

I think, like I said, it is individualism and creativity in giving answers and presenting my answers and doing everything in my own style.

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Twelve interviewees mentioned that they are persistent by nature, not only in learning, but also in other aspects of their lives. Students mentioned other characteristics like being creative, competitive, passionate about the English language, curious, and having an aspiration for a job opportunity where they can use English. The personal characteristics that the interviewees mentioned were relevant to how students autonomously make efforts to develop their language skills. For instance, interviewee (2) from the second case noted that she is an ambitious person with a big desire for success. This characteristic drives her to make more efforts in her autonomous language learning, which should open more job prospects for her.

In the questionnaire for students, the latter were asked two questions that could support the argument in this section. The first question was about if they think their language skills will decrease after graduation and why. The second question was about thinking about their future careers and their language learning performance. To answer the first question, the

majority of students at a ratio of 80% and 71% in cases (1) and (2), said that their language skills would not decrease after graduation (see the table below).

Table 16  
*The decrease of language skills after graduation*

	<b>Case (1) (University A)</b>		<b>Case (2) (University B)</b>	
Yes	09	20%	14	29%
No	36	80%	36	71%
Total	45	100	50	100%

The students from the survey illustrated their positive responses by saying that they will be teachers, so they will be using English constantly, while others explained that English makes part of their lives as they use it to talk to some friends, chat online, watch movies, surf the internet, and listen to music. To students, developing their language is less of an obligation and more of a natural process that occurs while they are enjoying their time.

In the second question, the survey participants were asked if thinking about their future careers affects their language learning performance. Most students (70%) and (69%) in cases (1) and (2) think that employability is a big factor that influences how much they are autonomous and engaged in developing their language skills. Students were asked to illustrate what kind of impact future career can have on their current learning. Their responses were thematically organised as mainly positive or negative, as demonstrated in the table below:

Table 17  
*The influence of thinking about future career on English language learning performance*

	<b>Case (1)/ (University A)</b>		<b>Case (2)/ (University B)</b>	
Positive	19	42%	17	37%
Negative	26	58%	26	52%
Other	00	0%	07	11%
Total	45	100	50	100%

According to the data in the table above, the majority of students have negative thoughts about their future careers, which consequently leads to lower motivation. Students justified their answers by saying that "I am afraid there won't be enough jobs," "there is not much you can do with English in Algeria, this reduces the chances of getting a job" "it would be

frustrating not to find a job". Students seem to have a pessimistic view of employability in their country. On the other hand, there were several voices who said that they learn English for the love of the language, some said, "I enjoy learning English regardless of the availability of job", and "I am positive that I will have a bright future with my English."

Students' personal views of whether or not they will find job positions in which they use their English language skills seem to impact their current motivation to learn. Regardless of how optimistic or pessimistic students' views are, the correlation between personal views on employability and autonomous English language learning is noted and acknowledged by the students-participants in this research. Having discussed this, the next section will explore the last factor that the interviewees held accountable for developing their language learner autonomy, which is technological devices.

### ***c. Technology***

The students-interviewees highlighted the importance of technological devices in developing their language learning and increasing their autonomy. This was especially apparent in their daily English-related practices like listening to music, watching movies and series, reading, and using social media to reinforce their communicative skills. They said:

Ok, When I wake up in the morning, I just put some music on, I put the volume down obviously I listen to my favourite music, favourite rappers and singers, sometimes I put my earphones when I am heading to college, also when I am talking to my friends, we use English language. And when I go back home, I have a lot of friends that I talk to online and play a lot of video games which are also in English. I watch a lot of movies and I and some stories in English too. I don't read in Arabic or French, just English

#### **Student Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Yeah of course, songs I listen to are in English, movies are in English, the news I watch, and articles are in English, so I am really in contact with the language so yeah. It is very important part of my daily life.

#### **Student Interviewee 12, Case (2)**

well internet is the most helping and thankfully we have at home.



### **Student Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

The activities that students mentioned are also reported at the beginning of this chapter, when they interpreted the concept of learner autonomy as independent outside classroom language learning behaviour. Students' language learning activities were described as effortless, entertaining practices that they enjoyed. In other words, using technological learning devices in English and learning English became part of their lifestyle rather than solely for language learning purposes. In this case, autonomy in language learning is embodied in them as individuals and does not necessarily occur in an academic learning context. To emphasise the importance of technological presence further, the interviewees mentioned that technology is mostly all they would need to depend on themselves for learning. For instance, interviewee (7) said:

Well, I would say more books in the library, more technology, we need Wi-Fi, internet

### **Student Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The student-interviewees also stressed the role of mobile phones in supporting their learning, especially when using the digital dictionary, which makes it easier for them to look up words for themselves instead of asking teachers and friends for their meanings every time. Technology also seems to provide students with opportunities as it can easily give access to authentic materials that are tailored to students' needs, wants, and interests. The abundance of entertaining learning materials provided by technology grants students opportunities to improve their language skills autonomously.

In the end, it is important to note that the factors mentioned above are more complex than how they were elaborated in this section. For instance, technology, motivation, and personal characteristics were found to have an influence on students' autonomy in both learning the language and learning the academic content. Such overlap of findings was not easy to dissolve into categories, but it is crucial to draw attention to it, especially when learning the English language and learning the academic content in this context already overlap, integrate, and feed into each other. Having illustrated this, the following section aims to present the factors that influence students' perceptions of the concept of learner autonomy.

#### **4.8. Factors influencing students' understandings of the concept of learner autonomy**

One of the important questions in this research is why students interpret learner autonomy the way they do. To answer this, students were asked to narrate their experiences in learning the English language, in learning in their formal education, and in learning in general. These experiences helped in drawing up a list of factors that seemed to influence the students' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. Besides this, students were also asked about how they became the autonomous learners that they said they are. The aim of such inquiries is to investigate the variables that lay in the background and pushed students to interpret learner autonomy the way they did. The factors that were highlighted in this investigation were personal, socio-cultural, and socio-educational. Each of these three factors is elaborated in the following section:

##### **4.8.1. Students' individual learning efforts**

It might be premature to claim at this stage that students in this research have individualistic tendencies in learning because this would challenge claims that advocate the collectivist nature of Algerian society due to its conformist culture and history. However, the evidence presented by students in this research showed otherwise. When the interviewees were asked about their autonomous learning experiences, they mostly referred to practices that reflect individualistic attitudes. They said:

I do learn English by myself, all by myself, and even at the academic level I do research all by myself as well. I am never dependent on the teacher, whether it is in English Math or any other subject. I mean I did rely on the teacher to some extent, but I always had that space to do things on my own

**Student Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

Inside the classroom I like to participate, but that comes after that I listen to what my teachers actually want to say so I respect their way to teaching and their methods, but I do not always take them as my only learning sources and way of learning I like to have my own strategies of learning. I have my own unique way I understand stuff, so I just grasp whatever information we are studying then I try to reformulate it I my own way.

**Student Interviewee 2, Case (2)**

All students in both case studies, including the interviewees (8) and (2) in the quotes above, demonstrated individualistic views in their responses to questions about learner autonomy. As shown in the excerpts above, students frequently referred to their personal involvement in learning activities, and they repeatedly used the pronoun “I” when describing any of the practices or the characteristics they associated with learner autonomy, which made it more individualistic sound. However, before making any judgement about how individualistic the students in this study are, one should also consider the overall socio-cultural and socio-educational context of the interviewees, which also emerged as themes in this research.

#### **4.8.2. Students’ socio-cultural environment**

The students-interviewees were asked about their upbringing, their learning experiences with their friends, and their wider social circles. These questions were asked to investigate potential external elements that influenced students’ current interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy. Broadly speaking, the findings show that families have always encouraged students to seek knowledge and rely on themselves to do that from a young age. They said:

I would say my sense of responsibility comes from my father he is always making sure that I learn things by myself I take good care of myself, so I was raised on this principle.

**Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

My father used to be a judge and my mother is very organised. So, at home we were very organised whether it is in the things you see or the way you think.

**Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

Family played a crucial role in not only opening students’ eyes to the importance of knowledge and education, but also in providing them with psychological and financial support until university level. Students’ supportive upbringing also encouraged them to value education and to rely on themselves, taking on the learner autonomy practices and characteristics they previously reported as proactivity in learning, like passion and persistence in learning. Therefore, the role of family would contribute to the interpretations that students gave of the concept of learner autonomy. Besides family, the students-interviewees also

explained the importance of their friends in their intellectual growth and in their lives in general, especially when it comes to learning the English language. They said:

Well, my friends are very supportive they speak English very well they are bright students, and you know two of them (I interviewed them earlier that day), and I see them as an important element of me learning English this good

**Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

As for my friends most of them are my classmates and most of our conversations are in English language when we talked about trends, movies, politics, all of our conversations are in English even my childhood friend who is not my classmates she also speaks English very well.

**Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

I write to people via social media, I have a lot of friends from UK and America, so I use English with them.

**Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

All students seemed very passionate about talking about their friends and the impact they make on their learning as speakers of the English language and as classmates who provoke study-related discussions. For students, friends present an opportunity to self-express in the foreign language that is very important in their studies, and they also provide a space to share thoughts with likeminded people. Although the influence of friends might seem very apparent as an enabler for autonomous learning, this can also be one of the factors that lead the students-interviewees to interpret learner autonomy in relation to expressing oneself, as in Section 4. 4. 3. c. The students-interviewees furthermore mentioned that they have friends overseas from English speaking countries like the UK and the USA with whom they play video games or share the same interests in different domains. In this case, the influence of these friends transcends the language learning aspect, as this could be a vital factor that widens students' understanding of their personal autonomy from a western perspective. This goes along with the influence of the media in this age of globalization, where western values of

individualism are reflected in movies, music, and news that are consumed by the rest of the world.

All students-interviewees reported that their friends and families mainly played a positive role in their lives as incentives in terms of motivating them, giving them opportunities to develop their language skills, their intellect, and by learning from the experiences of one another. However, for students, this positive reaction did not include their society, which, according to them, did not have any impact on their learning. They said:

As for society, I can't say it is an obstacle or that it helps.

**Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

(Society) it is not holding me back, but it is not a plus either like family or friends

**Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Society has no relation, there are no opportunities to practice English in my society. So, there is some kind of disconnection between society and English

**Interviewee 3, Case (2)**

Although students were convinced that society has no impact or whatsoever on the way they learn and express themselves, they also reported some stories and made some statements that indicate that their society does not welcome the use of English and that it is crippling when it comes to providing study spaces, and technological means, and opportunities to develop oneself. In addition to that, students noted that unlike French, which in Algeria is associated with being well-educated and civilised, English is not that common. So, for most people, you would be speaking a language that they simply do not understand. Students-interviewees said:

Society in Algeria is not Pro-English. using French outside is for people who are considered civilised probably while English speakers are considered as arrogant people which are trying to show off their capacities. As of we are saying that hey, I speak a language that you do not understand. They would think we are gossiping or something.

**Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

for example, my friends and I are talk in in English outside and someone hears us talking they start doing this thing about us showing off and all whereas we are not, every person is free to express himself the way they want, so it is not a sort of showing of or something.

**Interviewee 9, Case (1)**

When it comes to society, English is not very encouraged this goes back to some historical facts, if you speak English in the street, they look at you as an alien or some strange thing. So, speaking French is more normal and acceptable than speaking English.

**Interviewee 7, Case (2)**

As noted in the quotes above, the society of students presented a challenging environment to them in terms of expressing themselves in a language that makes a big part of their academic and personal lives. Students also noted that the society fails in providing learning facilities which are essential for cultural and intellectual growth of all people, and not only students of this study. However, although these might be tough challenges that students face within their societies, they also seem to have triggered resilience in students and made them autonomously explore different means and create opportunities for themselves to reach their learning goals.

Besides the crucial influence that students' individualist views and their socio-cultural impact have on their understanding of what autonomy in learning means, students also referred to their socio-educational environment. The latter also has its own specifications and impacts on students' perceptions of learner autonomy, as elaborated in the coming section.

**4.8.3. Students' socio-educational environment**

It is the aim of the Algerian educational system to produce autonomous learners and individuals. Given that students could be spending more time at university than they do at home, then the influence of the academic environment needs to be addressed. In this regard, student-interviewees were asked how they found learning at the university in comparison to other previous educational phases. In their responses, students acknowledged that their tertiary education allows more freedom than high school. They said:

In most cases teachers in high schools tend to be strict, I don't blame them because they are bound to the curriculum. At university they are willing to be flexible and some are, even when it comes to improving the lessons, like if you have a suggestion, you can make it and it can be considered, so in this sense there is freedom, and it makes the university experience much better than high school.

**Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Of course, well in university you are not bound by certain rules or what your teachers wants you to express. you are here to express yourself your own opinions and defend them at university we are kind of free in choosing themes and topics to discuss as long as we have the right argumentation to support it.

**Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

For instance, when it comes to written expression essays, we are free to choose our topics and presentations topics and even the ways in which we present and the ways in which we do our research are up to us.

**Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

The general impression that students have about university was that it has a positive influence on them as it is a place where they are treated as responsible adults. However, what was more relevant to this research is the interaction that happens inside this educational institution. The relationship between students and teachers and between students themselves at university reflects what autonomy means to students, as interpreted in previous sections. In this regard, students mentioned that their teachers are flexible in adjusting the course of their lesson in ways that are convenient to them. In addition to that, students mentioned that they are more flexible in some modules than others, as interviewee (1) explained. This mirrors interpretations of learner autonomy where students are not involved in the making of the lesson but when their voices are heard and welcomed in the classroom context. However, students noted that their participation depends on the teachers and how flexible and open they are to accepting criticism. For instance, interviewee (1) from case (1) was asked how she would deal with a situation where a teacher mispronounces a word or gives incorrect information. She said:

So, if the teacher is open, I discuss it with them if they accept my criticism or try to fix it would be fine, if not, I would do my own research and rely on myself to figure out whether it is right or wrong.

### **Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

In a scenario where a teacher mispronounces a word or gives incorrect information, the interviewee explained that she would talk to the teacher and provide him/her with the answer that she sees as correct. However, this does not necessarily happen in all cases. The interviewee clarified that she only speaks her mind if the teacher accepts criticism. If not, she would just do research on information that she is doubtful about. In this situation, the teachers are an authority figure in the Algerian classroom, and their image must be preserved. However, not always, as there are teachers who encourage students to express their opinions even when their views contradict those of the teachers.

The interaction between students and teachers, which is at times flexible but at other times filled with tension, can create a confusing learning environment for students where they need to consider the figure of the teacher, who may take any criticism as personal. On the other hand, students who are motivated and invested in what they learn, although they may not involve teachers in discussions that may potentially lead to misunderstandings, would still do research, and fortify their knowledge about what they study. Such social tension between students and teachers might lead students to resort to expressing their autonomous learning skills in ways that may not present a conflict with teachers by mainly engaging in beyond classroom autonomous learning or by viewing learner autonomy as a practice for critical thinking as it was explained earlier in this chapter (see Section 4. 4. 2. b).

Overall, these three presented factors seem to reason with the interpretations of learner autonomy as presented in earlier sections. For instance, the individual learning practices that students are involved in might seem to mirror the sense of individualism that students reflected when interpreting the concept of learner autonomy. Also, the socio-educational environment entails many complexities, like the different models that students have, the lack of learning materials, and the interaction with teachers, which depends on the personality of



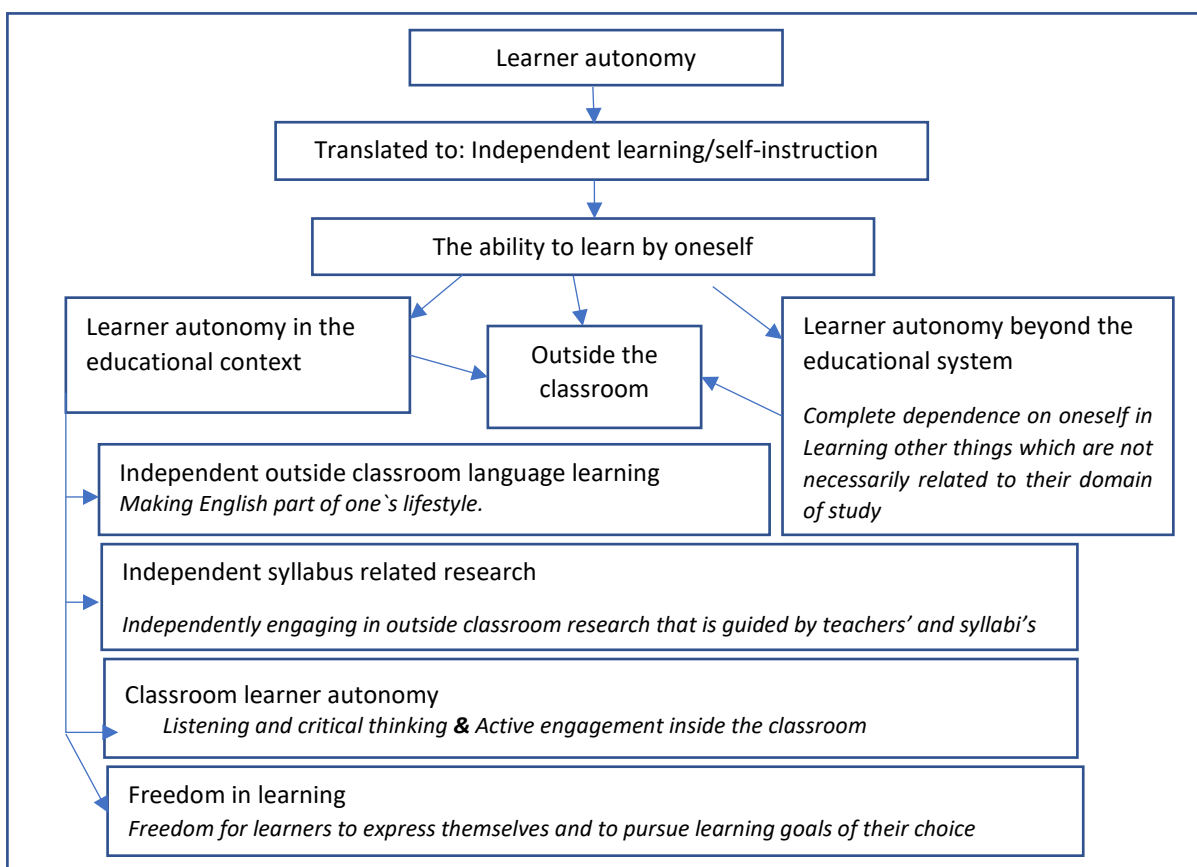
teachers. In addition, there is the socio-cultural environment which entails family, friends, and the society also impact students' learning practices. Family and friends were found to be supporting elements for students to develop themselves. Even though society was described as having no impact on students, it presented a challenging environment for them, which led them to develop resilience and courage in order not to conform to the norms of society.

Thus far, the students' findings have addressed interpretations of learner autonomy, practices, characteristics, and factors influencing students' autonomous learning and their understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. Having tackled this, and before moving on to presenting teachers' findings, the coming section shall present a brief summary of the interpretations of learner autonomy by the students-participants in this research.

#### 4.9. Summary of students' interpretations of learner autonomy

Before moving to the part of the research that discusses the teachers' findings, it would be better to summarise how students-participants in this study interpret the notion of learner autonomy. To do this, the following figure is sketched out to present all students' interpretations of learner autonomy, which would work as a road map giving a synopsis of the main findings of this research:

Figure 10  
*Students' contextualised interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy*



To begin with, students translated the concept of learner autonomy to independent learning and self-instruction. In their illustrations of what these two concepts mean to them, students referred to the same idea, which is their “ability to learn by themselves.” This broad understanding of the concept of learner autonomy was employed in a range of contexts, leading to various contextual interpretations of learner autonomy, as discussed in this section.

Initially, students gave examples of how they directed their learning without the intervention of any other authority. However, this learning is not necessarily related to what they study. According to their responses, students consider themselves autonomous in learning computer programming, musical instruments, expanding their expertise in astronomy and dermatology, and learning other languages rather than English. In this regard, learner autonomy is identified as a broad concept in which students assume responsibility for all the learning processes in whatever domain they are learning.

The second learning context that students associate learner autonomy with is their formal academic context. In this regard, students identified two different domains in which their autonomy takes place. The first is doing research related to the academic content they study, and the second is learning or ameliorating their English language skills. The two learning domains that students highlighted reflect their learning objectives, hence the learning practices that they consider acts of autonomy. Although students have only identified themselves as autonomous outside the classroom, they affirmed that they are more autonomous when it comes to learning the English language than they are when they learn about academic content in the different modules they study. The latter puts more restrictions on their learning in terms of creating the learning path, but after a learning path is created, students assume responsibility for developing and extending their knowledge as much as they want or as much as the materials allow them to. Students were also aware of their responsibilities towards their academic learning, which is guided and facilitated by their teachers. Therefore, students’ autonomy in learning starts when the classroom is over. Another interpretation of learner autonomy within the educational context was under the theme of freedom in learning, as indicated in the chart above. This reflected the liberatory

aspect of the concept in the sense that students view learner autonomy as an emancipating process from the teachers' authority. This interpretation of learner autonomy was not an issue of pedagogical processes; it was an issue of power and who has control over making decisions.

The last interpretation of the concept of learner autonomy was contextualised within the classroom environment, where students reported a variety of autonomous learning practices. The latter helped in recognising two forms of autonomous learning inside the classroom. The first is listening and critically thinking about what is being taught inside the classroom. So, even when students embraced their roles in listening to teachers, they identified this as an autonomous behaviour based on the mental processes, they use to assimilate information and put new knowledge into practice. The second form of autonomy identified within the classroom is proactive participation by being involved in discussions and being a support to teachers.

Overall, students' initial understanding of learner autonomy as learning on one's own was replicated in different learning contexts, in a variety of forms, and in various degrees depending on the restrictions that the context put on students. Moreover, learning on one's own seems to convey a plethora of practices and ways in which autonomy is enacted, but again, depending on the context and the learning objectives, students aim to achieve. Having explained this, in the coming section, attention is shifted to the teachers' findings, in which their views about the research issue are presented.

#### **4.10. Teachers' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy**

Teachers' views about the concept of learner autonomy were consulted to ensure having an encompassing understanding of what learner autonomy means in the context of this study. The teachers-interviewees were initially asked about the first thing that comes to their minds when they hear the concept of learner autonomy. Teachers' responses mainly involved answers like; students being responsible for their learning, rely on themselves in finding relevant materials to the lessons they study, and having a strong will and determination in learning. Interviewee (6) from the second case study gave a detailed answer that is somehow representative of the study sample. He said:

In simple words, Learner autonomy is that kind of learning which takes place outside the educational institution without the full intervention of the teacher. And here I do not mean the absence of the teacher, the teacher is always there offering help when students need help in achieving learning goals. Also, autonomy comes in degrees, there are situations where the teachers is totally absent. But the kind of autonomy that I am talking about is when students need some kind of guidance where the learner feels free to take decisions about their own learning.

**Teacher Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

To begin with, all teachers generally associate learner autonomy with outside classroom settings where students are engaged in learning activities that reinforce the lessons they have learned inside the classroom on their own. Teachers first linked learner autonomy to students being aware of their learning styles, being self-reliant when choosing learning materials and activities, and motivating themselves. However, this self-reliance is always guided by teachers, who may not be present with students all the time, but they dictate to them what academic learning goals to achieve. Teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy seem to first highlight a psychological aspect, which is being aware and self-motivated in learning. Secondly, it highlighted the pedagogical aspect of learner autonomy, where the focus was on the learning processes that involve relying on oneself in choosing learning activities and materials.

Teachers' data also seem to stress two major concepts that were used to describe learner autonomy. The first one is self-reliance, which they used interchangeably with the concept of independence in learning. As for the second concept, it was responsibility, which all the teachers-interviewees mentioned. When asked what learner autonomy means to teachers, they said:

The first thing that comes to my mind is responsibility.

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

It means that my students can be responsible about their learning process

**Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

It is the learner's ability to be in charge of his own learning.

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

Student is responsible, independent

### **Teacher Interviewee 3, Case (2)**

Responsibility and independence made an integral part of the teachers' illustration of the concept of learner autonomy. Therefore, exploring what they exactly mean to teachers would help better understand how the concept of learner autonomy is projected. However, because the two concepts of independence and responsibility in learning are broad concepts that would mean different things and entail different practices in different contexts, teachers were asked to further elaborate on the two concepts. Teachers' elaboration on the two concepts is presented in the following section, in which a new theme emerged from the teachers' data.

#### ***4.10.1. The ability to learn in detachment from teachers***

As indicated in the section above, teachers described learner autonomy using the two broad concepts of independence and responsibility in learning. As a result, it was necessary to further unpack these two concepts and understand exactly what teachers mean by them. Teachers' findings about independence and responsibility in learning were coined as "the ability to learn in detachment from teachers," particularly in learning the academic content of students, which is an aspect that will be further illustrated in the coming section.

First, teachers acknowledged that the values of learner autonomy correlate to the ones of independence and responsibility in learning, which explains their use of these three concepts interchangeably. Teachers' findings about the meanings of independent learning and responsible learning overlapped, as noted in the following excerpts:

Well, the term independence is not that far from the notion learner autonomy, independence entails to be responsible

### **Teacher Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

Well, there is a relation between responsibility and independence. both are the two sides of the same coin. an independent learner is someone who is responsible for his own acts and someone who is responsible for his own act is automatically an independent person

### **Teacher Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

The overlap in data when analysing descriptions of independence and responsibility in learning was noted from the beginning of the investigation. However, this became more apparent when teachers gave examples of what characterised independent and responsible students. In that regard, the teacher said:

An independent learner is confident enough and aware of making personal research to deepen his knowledge based on limited guiding for instance notes or guidelines required from lectures or courses

**Teacher Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

(a responsible learner) is the one who would fulfil the requirement expected from him ah, emm. I think that is it... because if someone is responsible, they would recognise their part of the job. I am a teacher, I can provide them with guidelines, help them understand but there is this part which says it is their duty that it is their job to do things by themselves.

**Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

In the two quotes above, the two interviewees from the two case studies gave similar descriptions of what an independent learner is and what a responsible learner is. Their descriptions were based on the students' ability to learn and deepen their knowledge based on the limited materials that teachers offer them. Other descriptions of learner autonomy were given by the teachers-interviewees (4) and (2) from the case studies (2) and (1), respectively. They said:

A responsible learner is someone, we as teachers, can count on him or her. He or she is always ready for all assignments, tests, exams, and extra-hours. This kind of learner is ready to overcome adversity to succeed.

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

An independent learner is the one who relays on himself in not only understanding the syllabus, and the module they are studying but also identifies the reliable sources

**Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Descriptions of independent and responsible learners matched within the teachers' data. In both quotes above, there is an emphasis on students' sense of duty towards their studies, which translates to self-reliance over the whole learning process. Perhaps this was better articulated by Interviewee (4) in case (1) who described an independent learner as someone who "cuts the umbilical cord with the teacher," allowing learning to be more flexible, creative, and easily conducted with awareness about what is being learned.

The interviewees in both case studies seem to confirm the tight and entangled relationship between the concepts, learner autonomy, responsibility, and independence in learning. These concepts seem to meet and feed into one another when defining any of them separately. Findings of this section also show that what teachers described as responsibility and independence in learning seem to generally refer to the students' ability to learn in detachment from teachers. However, although the theme generated may sound to adopt values of independence more than responsibility, which is a psychological characteristic, it implied both, students' independent action, and their sense of duty towards their learning.

In the end, the examples that teachers gave about independence and responsibility in learning essentially helped in understanding what the construct concept of learner autonomy means from the teachers' perspective. However, what is also to be noted in the findings is that learner autonomy was associated to learning the institutional/academic content that teachers teach. This issue is further addressed in the contextual interpretations of learner autonomy in the following section.

#### **4.11. Teachers' contextual interpretations of learner autonomy**

Teachers' findings from the section above showed that their understanding of the concept of learner autonomy was based on the two notions of responsibility and independence, and it was described as the students' ability to learn in detachment from teachers. Although such a description of learner autonomy helps in drawing a broad image about what this concept means, it lacks context and details, which are explored in the present section about the contextual interpretations of the addressed concept. In that regard, teachers' interpretations of what learner autonomy means were associated with the academic content that makes part

of the students' course within and beyond the classroom context. This is illustrated in the following two sections:

#### **4.11.1. Autonomy in learning the formal academic content**

As previously indicated, teachers only described autonomy in learning the academic content that students have. This is very apparent when consulting the examples that teachers employed when explaining what learner autonomy means to them alongside other concepts like independence and responsibility. In this regard, the teachers-interviewees said:

Learner autonomy means to me students relying on their own while they are trying to find relevant content material related to their studies, self-awareness about weaknesses strength and things they need to work on, there is also this constant self-evaluation and assessment, they would be their own judge, they don't wait for the teacher to tell them that you need to improve this or that or check their level.

##### **Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

An independent learner is the one in the practical side is the one who always asks questions in the classroom, is the one who asks you at the end of the session about what is to be tackled in the upcoming session, so they get prepared in advance to enrich the discussion outside the classroom.

##### **Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

A responsible learner is someone, we as teachers, can count on him or her. He or she is always ready for all assignments, tests, exams and extra-hours. This kind of learner is ready to overcome adversity to succeed.

##### **Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

In all the examples that the teachers-interviewees from both case studies gave, there was a reference to autonomous learners as good students who expand on the knowledge discussed inside the classroom by doing research under the teachers' guidance. This was mentioned along with examples of autonomous students preparing for coming lessons, involving themselves in classroom discussions, and supporting their academic knowledge with materials that serve the syllabi and the modules they study. Perhaps this was better



articulated in a quote by interviewee (7) from Case (1). When the interviewee was asked what learner autonomy means to her, she said:

It means that my students can be responsible about their learning process, at least when they are revising or re-checking information that I gave them. My students should know how to use the information that I give them in searching for more about the lectures they study, how to get the data they need to understand the lectures through videos, articles, books and so on. So, briefly, it is not to rely only on what the teachers give students. So, the teachers cannot give 100% of information, they should try to get more.

#### **Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The quote above seems to re-confirm the previous theme about teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy as being detached from teachers in learning. In addition, it also specifically explains that, to teachers, autonomy of students occurs at the level of learning the academic content that makes part of their course. Although the interviewees (7) along with three others, are responsible for language skills modules, namely (oral expression and writing skills), the example they gave addressed the information that students would present than their fluency in language use. Such responses from language skills teachers matched those of teachers responsible for academic content modules, like interviewee (4) who teaches research methodology. In the end, it was a majority of 12 teachers from both universities who explained to them that learner autonomy was more about students' ability to navigate their lessons and the domain they study by themselves and bring new information and skills to the classroom.

All in all, teachers strictly viewed learner autonomy through an academic lens, as in furthering one's knowledge about the formal academic content beyond the classroom context. As such interpretations do not consider the classroom context, the following section shall bring focus on teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy within the classroom.

#### **4.11.2. Teachers' perceptions of classroom learner autonomy**

As indicated in the previous section, teachers majorly associated learner autonomy with outside classroom learning, which is what was also indicated in students' findings. Therefore, just like students, teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy inside the classroom did not

naturally emerge when discussing the concept, rather, it needed to be addressed in the teachers' interviews. When teachers were asked about what makes their students autonomous inside the classroom context, and if they can be autonomous inside the classroom in the first place, their responses were as follows:

In certain lectures I feel I have given them the necessary points; he (an autonomous learner) would try to participate by contributing with certain elements that did not include in my class

**Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

They are the ones who correct mistakes inside the classroom. The ones who for instance take the initiatives to give their own opinions to elaborate the points being tackled inside the classroom. Outside the classroom as I said before, it is those who regularly visit the library, to develop the language skills, they read a lot.

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

I think autonomy inside the classroom is related to problem solving. How to solve a problem an activity or answer a question inside the classroom

**Teacher Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

To teachers, autonomy inside the classroom is related to the students' volitional engagement in the lessons being taught. In other words, autonomy is when students ask questions, bring new ideas into the classroom, and share new information to discuss them with their teachers and their classmates. This eventually shows teachers that students are creative and dedicated, and they do make efforts to develop their knowledge outside the classroom. This was the common perception of classroom learner autonomy by all teachers. However, there was one teacher who presented a different interpretation of the meaning of "learner autonomy" to him inside the classroom context. The teacher-interviewee (3) from the first case study shared an incident that happened to him with a student that he considered an autonomous learner. He said:

... I had set certain topics to be discussed and assigned individuals to prepare presentations and one of the students he was the last to come to the board and

present, first he was reluctant, then he said I have my own topic and if I can speak or present my topic, I would find many things to say

### **Teacher Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

The behaviour that teacher (3) recognised as an act of autonomy was not represented in the students' skills, which eventually impressed the teacher, but it was identified in a more political sense when the student suggested talking about a topic of his own choice, knowing that he would perform better. In this case, the student demonstrated confidence, initiative, independence, and responsibility, all of which made the teacher remember this incident and present it as a distinguishable act of autonomy inside the classroom. This situation was a special case that no other teachers reported. Perhaps the reason why the student in the previous example was able to decide what to do research about -which is what the teacher recognised as an act of autonomy- is because of the nature of the module itself. This was explained by the teacher-interviewee (7) from Case (1) who noted that teachers give more space for students' autonomy in language skills modules like oral expression. She said:

In oral expression module, student have more freedom and more space for creativity, so you find students who are autonomous doing so much efforts or additional efforts to what is required form them. And in the same situation students who are not autonomous, they come without preparation and when they are asked to give their presentations or talk about their topic you can tell that they are just improvising.

### **Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

In language skills modules like oral expression, as the interviewee stated in the quote above, students have more freedom for creativity, therefore students take advantage of that to demonstrate their language skills. However, not the same space is given in subject knowledge modules, which are based on pre-defined syllabi. In such modules, autonomy is when students enrich the discussion in the classroom. In that regard, the teacher interviewee (7) continues to explain that:

Well, when I am teaching social human sciences, I will be talking most of the time during the lecture, so what autonomous students do is to support the lecture with new information that I may not say, and this means that they have done their

research outside the classroom. Also, sometimes during the lecture students who are autonomous frequently use the dictionary to understand the meaning of words and provide examples.

#### **Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The examples that the teacher gave in the quote above highlighted students' autonomous learning behaviours, which are relevant to the academic content modules (social human sciences in this example). These autonomous behaviours consisted of contributing to the lecture with new information and looking up the vocabularies that students did not understand instead of consulting the teacher every time. Such detail highlights that the nature of the modules addressed seems to play an important role in how and to what extent students demonstrate autonomous learning behaviour, which seems to function specifically within a space that prioritises students' contribution and curiosity.

In the end, the teachers' interpretation of learner autonomy inside the classroom appeared to be related to their students' active participation by involving themselves in discussions, asking questions, and starting debates. Besides this, findings in this section revealed that, for teachers, learner autonomy is strictly expressed in the information and knowledge that students obtain in their formal academic education. This research reflected the viewpoint of a student sample who seemed to identify the aspect of autonomy in English language learning. However, this was not the case for teachers. The latter mostly stressed the importance of learning the academic content-related modules that makes part of the students' degree. Therefore, their interpretations of learner autonomy were mainly with respect to the academic domains that they teach.

Having revealed some of the complexities about how learner autonomy is interpreted by teachers, I shall move on to the following section, which presents the findings about students' practices that teachers associate with autonomous learning in their teaching context. These practices are another way to further understand and explore how teachers view their students' learner autonomy.

#### **4.12. Teachers' reported characteristics and practices of autonomous learners**

Investigating the characteristics and practices that the teachers attribute to students whom they consider autonomous provided more evidence about how teachers view the concept of

autonomy. The investigation about the traits and practices that teachers associate with autonomous learners also helped understand how autonomous learners are recognised by teachers. In that regard, the teachers-interviewees were first asked if they could identify autonomous learners in their classes. Without any hesitation, all teachers answered "yes," which suggests that autonomous learners in this context are with distinguishable characteristics and practices. However, none of the teachers seemed satisfied with the number of students whom they considered autonomous. For instance, interviewee (1) said:

Yeah, but there are not a lot, maybe they are unconsciously doing it, but they are autonomous.

#### **Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

Although teachers acknowledged that the number of autonomous students in their classes is notably small, their opinions were important to consider, particularly in understanding the traits and practices associated with learner autonomy. Teachers were asked about their autonomous students' characteristics, situations in which students revealed autonomous behaviour to them, and their description of the ideal students for them. In addition to the interviews, data from the questionnaire addressed to teachers were considered as well. Teachers' questionnaire responses seemed to confirm the findings of the interviews, hence enhanced their reliability. Before presenting any of the findings, I need to note that findings about students' practices and characteristics associated with learner autonomy happen to overlap with each other. Therefore, in the following sections, I will describe autonomous students' characteristics from teachers' points of view, then illustrate under each characteristic the practices reported by teachers.

##### **4.12.1. Awareness about the academic content studied**

Teachers described how important the academic content they teach is to them and to their students. This was one of the earliest themes about autonomous students' characteristics. This theme involves teachers-interviewees describing autonomous students as being mindful and aware of their learning responsibilities, aware of areas of their strengths and weaknesses, and aware of what and how to learn. In this element, teachers also emphasised on the mental processes that contribute to students' autonomous learning like having the ability to cope with a high level of understanding, their constant state of thinking inside the classroom, and their ability to be sharp and quick thinkers, which is relevant to being smart. The interviewees

also mentioned that autonomous learners have analytical skills which facilitate for them the process of understanding the different topics they discuss. Teachers' views are presented in the following excerpts:

Learners should be old enough to know what to learn and linked to what is he learns in the classroom; he should be aware of what he is learning, he should know how to extent his knowledge

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

They cope with a high level of understandings. They transcend to pre-set objectives; they can easily keep up with the flow of the course and its pace.

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

Yeah, one of my students recently have suggested why not to choose one of the data collection tools and put it into practice, she said for more practice we need to experience data collection process in real context or in the real world. So, it was really, I was really amazed to receive such suggestion

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

They are interested in learning and also show critical thinking they are not passive and only receive information. A student who questions and tries to understand information and not accept whatever information is give, a student who doesn't only memorise

**Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The above quotes are only a sample of plenty of other practices that fall into the same category of being mindful about one's own studies. As indicated earlier, the interviewees put great emphasis on being thoughtful, responsible, and flexible in managing their learning. Teachers also highlighted the importance of knowing how and what to learn for autonomous students, which enables them to be self-guided in their quest for knowledge. Findings from the interviews are confirmed by questionnaire data, where teachers were asked questions about autonomous students' learning practices that correlate to the currently discussed theme. (See the table below.)

Table 18

*Teachers' views about students' autonomous learning practices (1)*

Statements in the questionnaire		Case (1)		Case (2)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Decide the topic of their project work (exposé)	2.21	1.76	2.72	1.42
2	Make learning/teaching suggestions to their teachers	2.42	1.65	3.00	0.50
3	See their teachers as guides and facilitators to their learning	3.14	1.79	3.45	0.93
5	Willingly take notes and write all their lessons	3.85	0.77	3.90	0.83
9	Attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory	4.14	0.66	4.09	0.83
22	Evaluate their knowledge and communicative skills (i.e. self-reflect and monitor their progress in learning)	4.14	0.66	4.18	0.87
32	Have a better understanding of how they learn the best	4.14	0.66	4.27	0.65

The questionnaire proposed to teachers includes a list of suggested autonomous learning practices on which the participants of this study were requested to agree/disagree on. This was on a scale form (1) which means strongly disagree to (5) which means strongly agree. Firstly, the findings in the table above about the proposed statements show that the data from teachers in the two case studies are almost identical. This was further confirmed with a T-test that revealed a P value of 0.58 which is greater than the estimated alpha value of 0.05. These results lead us to accept the null hypothesis proposition that entails the absence of any significant statistical difference in the two data sets from the teachers at the two universities A and B. The similarities in data in this case also justify the methodological decision to present the two case studies jointly to avoid redundancy in this research, and this is a case that has been established earlier in this chapter.

The table above shows that teachers' data were positive at a high mean in the last four statements. For example, most teachers in both cases think that autonomous students attend lectures though they are not compulsory, this was at a mean of 4.14 and 4.09 for universities (A) and (B) respectively. In another example, the last statement in the table above implies that autonomous learners have a better understanding of how they learn best. This involved a sense of awareness of what is being taught to students and how they react to the lessons

they study. Teachers' responses to this statement were very positive at a mean of 4.14 for university (A) and (4.27) for university (B).

Perhaps the most noteworthy findings that could be noted in the table above are the first two statements in which teachers in both universities scored a low mean of less than 3. Teachers did not seem to agree on those two statements. The first one was about autonomous students deciding about the topic of their projects, and the second one was about autonomous students' making teaching/learning suggestions to teachers. Evidently, teachers do not see students as decision makers within the classroom context. For them, to be autonomous, students need to be aware of the responsibilities assigned to them and act on those responsibilities with hard work.

To recapitulate, in both case studies, and in both data (interviews and questionnaires), teachers have described autonomous learners as those students who are aware of what they are being taught and familiar with their responsibilities within and outside the classroom context. Another remark that could be added, and it is mostly noted in the interviews, is that teachers often tend to refer to observable practices when describing autonomous learners. However, being mindful about what students learn also entails cognitive processes like being critical and methodical when thinking. These characteristics happen to be reflected in the following characteristics of autonomous learners:

#### **4.12.2. Researchers**

The teachers-interviewees reported that autonomous learners are researchers. In fact, doing research was used as a defining characteristic for teachers when describing autonomous learners. In that respect, teachers' responses in the interviews affirmed that autonomous learners are always in the quest for knowledge to fulfil their educational goals underlined in the syllabus, which is what the following excerpts illustrate. They said:

For example, if we have a lecture today, they would bring elements I didn't give them, this means that there is contribution, they did research and found something new

#### **Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

From time-to-time students come to me and tell me I have found this or that or could you tell me or give me some sources because need them in extending this



or that so there are some students who are really autonomous, and we can rely on them to be independent in their learning.

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

The learner who is able to expand the key components of the displayed course, develop, synthesize and extrapolate

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

I already mentioned that students need to prepare for the upcoming lessons, they bring questions to discuss inside the classroom

**Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

Teachers' description of students as researchers does not include preparing articles for publication; it is more about enriching one's knowledge about their academic content outside the classroom by navigating the internet and reading books. Doing research also included students' revising their lessons after they were delivered, preparing for upcoming lessons, and linking what they studied within and outside the classroom context. Teachers seem to highly regard these practices as a sign of autonomy. To them, doing research is not a mere activity. However, it signifies that students have genuine interest in their studies, and it demonstrates that they make efforts to fulfil their educational objectives.

To teachers, doing research after finishing the classes is an act of autonomy, and it has a positive impact on students' learning attitudes within the classroom, where they would have sufficient information to contribute to classroom discussions. Although the type of research that teachers referred to involves syllabus-related elements. However, teachers highly praised those students who are not only confined to the information presented inside the classroom, but also those who autonomously engage in learning opportunities that go beyond the prescribed academic syllabus.

Teachers' questionnaire responses seem to validate the data from the interviews. When teachers were asked about the extent to which they would agree on statements that often correlate to autonomous learners doing research, their responses were mainly positive to varying degrees, as shown in the table below.

Table 19

*Teachers' views about students' autonomous learning practices (2)*

Statements in the questionnaire	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
10 Do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory	3.64	0.63	3.72	1.19
11 Look for the topic of the coming lesson and prepare themselves for it	4.14	0.66	3.81	0.98
17 Read books, articles, etc... without being told to	4.5	0.51	4.45	0.52
19 Make a study plan and stick to it in order to achieve their aim	4.28	0.61	3.81	1.25
21 Enrich their knowledge about lessons which they have not understood	4.00	0.67	4.18	0.87
29 They are always ready to increase their knowledge and learn more about different things	4.21	0.57	4.45	0.69

Teachers seem to hold solid views about autonomous learners, characterised by their skills for research and seeking knowledge. In the table above, several statements were proposed to the teachers-participants, some statements had a higher mean than others, but they were all high, as in more than 3.5. For instance, teachers were asked if autonomous learners read books and articles without being told to. Their responses resulted in a very high mean of 4.5 for university (A) and 4.45 for university (B). These high means were also for other statements where teachers agreed that autonomous learners look for the topic of the coming lesson and prepare for it, enrich their knowledge about the lessons that they have not understood, and always ready to increase their knowledge and learn more about different things. The lowest mean that was scored from teachers was for statement (10) in which teachers almost seemed to have neutral views about students having to do non-compulsory tasks and assignments as an act of autonomy. Although teachers did not oppose these activities, the data shows that such practices may not be necessary for students to be characterised as autonomous.

The slight discrepancies in teachers' results did not contribute to any statistical significance. This was particularly confirmed after conducting a two sample with equal variances T-test comparing the overall mean for teachers from the first case 4.12 and teachers in the second case 4.07; this resulted in a P value of 0.75 which is less than the estimated Alpha value of

0.05. Such results lead to once again accepting the null hypothesis of the absence of any statistically significant differences between the two research groups.

Before moving to the next section, it is important to note that teachers' data from both interviews and questionnaires showed that doing research is a necessary characteristic of autonomous learners and autonomous learning, which enable learners to gain more knowledge and come to the classroom with illuminating information that teachers may not have. Moreover, autonomous learners who do research are equipped with more information that also allows them to be autonomous inside the classroom by contributing to discussions with their peers. On that account, it can be said that students' engagement inside the classroom requires a psychological disposition and some background on the topics being discussed. This would eventually enable students to take risks and demonstrate autonomy within the confined classroom context. More illustrations about students' classroom autonomous learning endeavours are presented in the following section.

#### **4.12.3. Active participants inside the classroom**

In their description of autonomous learners, teachers insisted on the active, self-initiated engagement of students inside the classroom, which demonstrates students' sense of responsibility and independence towards their learning. The teachers-interviewees described autonomous learners as proactive and interactive elements in the classroom. They also described them as confident and daring to ask questions. The view of autonomous learners having an active role within the classroom was an integral element in the interpretation of learner autonomy inside the classroom, as reported in previous sections. Not only that, but it was also a defining characteristic for autonomous students that emerged as a strong theme when analysing data from teachers. In this regard, the teachers-interviewees described autonomous learners as:

The ones who for instance take the initiatives to give their own opinions to elaborate the points being tackled inside the classroom

#### **Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

They are not shy; they ask questions too.... you noticed here that they have a background and they made research. so even that the topic is new, but they still have something to say and to share with me and the rest of the classroom.

### **Teacher Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

Autonomous learners are well known to open breaches within the flow of information accentuating a blurred concept to be clarified. Adding extra data to what is displayed

### **Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

Teachers repeatedly reported and reflected on the active role of autonomous students in the learning process. The quotes above are only a sample of the plenty of activities and roles that teachers assign to autonomous learners, particularly inside the classroom. These roles involve asking questions, asking for resources, engaging in classroom discussions, and sharing knowledge with their classmates and the teacher. However, what is common in these roles is that they are self-initiated. In other words, students do not have to be nudged to do any of the above-mentioned activities inside the classroom.

The practices mentioned above also seem to narrate a deeper view of autonomous learners as confident individuals who can step out of their comfort zone and take risks to express their opinions by overcoming their psychological barriers in learning situations. Teachers seem to highly appreciate outgoing students with such a learning attitude and consider them an example of autonomous learners who are genuinely interested in learning and developing their intellect and skills. To further confirm this, when teachers were asked about the characteristics of non-autonomous students or those who lack autonomy, their answers revolved around students who do not engage inside the classroom. Interviewee (7) said in this regard:

They don't ask any questions and avoid any chances to interact with the teacher

### **Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

Once again, teachers highlighted the importance of taking risks to ask questions and raise discussions as one of the determining features of autonomous students inside the classroom. Active participation in this context also demonstrates that students have a genuine interest in learning. Teachers were also aware that there are some brilliant students with anxiety and confidence issues that make it difficult for them to have their voice heard in the classroom. Teachers had conflicting views about whether be classified as autonomous or not. In that regard, while some addressed such students as autonomous based on the research they do,

others, like interviewee (4) in the first case, acknowledged that autonomous learning is based on classroom interaction as a two-way stream between teachers and students, and amongst students themselves.

The teachers' questionnaire also involved a section in which teachers were asked what parties should assume or share responsibilities within the classroom context. Teachers were simply given a list of responsibilities based on Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy. These responsibilities, along with the teachers' responses, are illustrated in the table below.

Table 20  
*Teachers' perspectives on classroom learning/teaching responsibilities inside the classroom*

Statements	Case (1) (University A)			Case (2) (University B)		
	Teachers	Students	Both	Teachers	Students	Both
1 Setting the objectives of course (module)	86%	0%	14%	80%	10%	10%
2 Selecting the topic of the lesson	43%	0%	57%	64%	18%	18%
3 Selecting the activities and tasks	64%	7%	29%	55%	18%	27%
4 Choosing the studying materials	50%	7%	43%	54%	10%	36%
5 Choosing evaluation techniques	64%	0%	36%	80%	10%	10%

All the responsibilities proposed in the table above are concerned with making major decisions that can potentially affect the course of study for learners and teachers. Interestingly, most teachers in both cases seem to attribute the proposed responsibilities to themselves or occasionally show willingness to share those responsibilities with their learners. For instance, 80% of teachers in case (2) said that it is their responsibility to set the objectives of the course. In the second statement, we start to notice some slight differences between cases (1) and (2). While 57% of teachers in the first case believed that selecting the topic of the lesson should be a responsibility shared between students and teachers, 64% of the respondents in the second case believed this decision was solely the responsibility of the teacher. For the remaining three statements, the majority of teachers in both cases agreed that it is their responsibility to select activities and tasks, study materials, and evaluation techniques. Interestingly, the percentages of teachers who thought that students should take on any of the proposed responsibilities did not exceed 10% in case (1) and 20% in case (2).

The results from the questionnaire show that, although teachers view autonomous learners as active participants as presented and discussed in the interviews, this active participation is nowhere near making major classroom decisions like deciding what to study, how to study,

the materials to use, or the evaluation techniques involved in students' assessment. In the end, from the teachers' perspective, students' active participation inside the classroom does not involve making major decisions about the course of study. However, it mainly entails having a strong personal attitude towards learning, which leads to the discussion about motivation as an enabler for autonomous learning in the succeeding section.

#### **4.12.4. Motivated**

All teachers had strong views about the importance of motivation for students to learn autonomously. Teachers explicitly noted this by describing autonomous students as well-motivated individuals who show willingness and interest in their learning. Teachers said:

An autonomous learner is someone who is intrinsically motivated

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

You can tell when they are talking and discussing that they have done some research. They show interest in what they study, and they know how to express themselves in English too

**Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

... they don't know how to stop when they have a problem, they need to solve it, persistent

**Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

Those kinds of students having an intrinsic motivation, they know what they need and what they want to reach at the end of their learning and career.

**Teacher Interviewee 3, Case (1)**

Those who take initiative, those who do more than the others, they are committed in a sense they do things without being asked to

**Teacher Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

He or she is always ready for all assignments, tests, exams and extra-hours. This kind of learner is ready to overcome adversity to succeed

**Teacher Interviewee 3, Case (2)**

knows how to handle obstacles to facilitate the learning process

**Teacher Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

To teachers, autonomous students are by definition motivated. So, to them, it is a matter of how well motivated students are. In other words, the more motivated students are, the more likely they are to engage in autonomous learning. The teachers-participants seemed to put a particular emphasis on intrinsic motivation in their description of autonomous learners, saying that they are more likely to act responsibly and independently in their learning, which is how learner autonomy was described in their findings. Teachers also referred to the genuine interest that autonomous learners have in their learning, which is a powerful drive for independent action. In addition to this, autonomous learners were described as persistent in their learning, agents who find solutions to their learning difficulties, and individuals who overcome setbacks in their learning. This perseverance reflects students' motivation and genuine interest in what they are learning. Besides this, there are other traits like interest in learning and curiosity that teachers use to describe motivation in autonomous learners. The importance of motivation is also apparent in the practices that teachers associated with autonomous learning practices in the questionnaire. (See the table below.)

Table 21  
*Teachers' views about students' autonomous learning practices (3)*

Statements in the questionnaire	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
23 Motivate themselves when they feel down about their learning	4.50	0.55	4.27	0.65
25 They are self-driven people (they don't wait for people to tell me what to do)	4.10	0.53	3.90	1.22
26 They are persistent (do not easily give up) when facing any difficulty in learning English	4.50	0.55	4.36	0.50
28 Challenge themselves in learning	4.07	0.47	4.27	0.79
30 Take chances to speak in English and communicate their thoughts	4.28	4.72	4.45	0.69
36 Participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom	4.35	0.63	3.72	0.79

The questionnaire addressed to teachers consisted of a list of practices about motivation. Teachers scored very high means on most of the proposed practices. For instance, in statement (23) about autonomous students motivating themselves when they feel down about their learning, teachers in case (1) and (2) scored a high mean of 4.50 and 4.27 respectively. In another statement, teachers were asked to what extent they agreed that autonomous learners are persistent when facing any difficulties learning English. Teachers'

responses were at a high mean of 4.50 in the first case and 4.36 in the second one. Perhaps the most noticeable discrepancy between the two case studies is in statement (36). When teachers were asked to what extent they agreed that autonomous learners participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom. In this regard, teachers from the second case study had a relatively high mean of 3.72. However, their counterparts in Case (2) scored a significantly higher mean of 4.35. Although teachers in the two case studies might have shown some discrepancies in the data, like in the previously discussed element, these differences remain insignificant in comparison to the level of convergence found between the data in the two universities. This was further confirmed by conducting a two-sample unequal variance T-test similar to the ones illustrated in sections 4.5.1, 4.12.1, and 4.12.2. The test results showed a P value of 0.34 which is larger than the estimated alpha value of 0.05. Consequently, a null hypothesis was confirmed, and hence, no statistical significance was found.

In the end, teachers seem to have some firm views about the importance of motivation when discussing learner autonomy. This was apparent when asking them about the characteristics of autonomous learners in the interviews, and when showing the extent to which they agreed on the statement about motivation in the questionnaire. Having explained this, the next section shall present another characteristic that teachers attribute to autonomous learners, which concerns English language learning and use.

#### **4.12.5. Competent English language users**

All the teachers' responses about learner autonomy have been mostly oriented towards the academic knowledge that students learn as part of their course. Consequently, their interpretations of learner autonomy were framed in relation to subject knowledge learning. Students' language skills were mostly overlooked in teachers' discourse about interpretations of learner autonomy in both case studies. It was not until they were asked about the characteristics of autonomous students that when teachers highlighted the importance of language proficiency. In their responses, students' language skills are a contributing factor to their learner autonomy in this context. At the same time, they are one of the traits of autonomous learners. Teachers-interviewees said:



I think autonomy comes at an advanced level; students cannot be autonomous if they don't know the language very well, they should know the language, so they can improve on it

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

The process of mastering a language itself requires some sort of autonomy, hard work and motivation. So good language users are autonomous, and their language skills is a sign of their autonomy. And those who don't have a good command of the language they would be struggling with the language itself which would prevent them from doing research and becoming autonomous in learning the content, not the language

**Teacher Interviewee 6, Case (1)**

Teachers referred to students whom they see as autonomous as being eloquent, having a good command of English, having a good vocabulary, and making few or no mistakes in comparison to those who are not autonomous. Characterizing autonomous learners as already competent language users presents an issue in this specific context where teachers are often referred to as "EFL teachers", but their teaching practices mostly focus on the academic content they present to their students. At the same time, teachers expect their students to come with advanced language skills. Teachers postulate that English is not essentially learned inside the classroom, and that students' language learning practices need to be autonomously conducted beyond the formal academic context. In this regard, interviewee (9) said:

I think learning the English language at university is autonomous, and poor language skills tell a lack of autonomy. Learning English mostly relies on practice and the extra efforts you put in, because no matter how much efforts you put in the classroom to learn English, it is not really enough to learn a language. So, learning a language is an autonomous process itself.

**Teacher Interviewee 9, Case (2)**

The teacher in the quote above presented a similar view to the interviewee (6) from the first case study. They both acknowledged that learning a language is an autonomous process that depends on the time and effort a learner puts into learning the language outside the

classroom. This requires students to rely on themselves and their own learning methods, strategies, and resources to improve their language skills. Moreover, to teachers in this context, learner autonomy in learning the formal academic content of students is more of a transcendence from autonomous language learning, but occasionally, a learner mingles between the two. To further explain this, language learner autonomy is seen as more of a pre-requisite to fulfilling a bigger goal, which is academic content autonomy. In addition to this, teachers went further in their responses to explain the importance of having good language skills, which are listed as one of the major factors that influence how autonomous students can be in their academic content learning, as shall be explained in forthcoming sections. However, before moving any further, I shall present some of the quantitative findings from the teachers-questionnaire that address language learner autonomy. Findings from the teachers' questionnaire seem to support and confirm their views from the interviews:

Table 22  
*Teachers' reported practices on autonomous language learning*

Statements in the questionnaire		Case (1)		Case (2)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
16	Learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc	4.55	0.89	4.71	0.60
20	Use English when watching movies, listening to music or on social media	4.00	0.67	4.54	0.52
15	Use different strategies when learning English	4.21	0.57	4.54	0.52
32	Enjoy learning English	4.35	0.63	4.36	0.81
34	Learn English better independently	4.14	0.36	3.90	1.04
38	Involved in English language clubs and association	3.15	1.28	4.18	0.75

To begin with, the statements in the table above are just a sample of many others that teachers were asked about language learner autonomy in their questionnaire (see Appendix 2). The table above lists five statements proposed to teachers and students in the two case studies. In short, very high means from 3.9 to 4.7 were found approximately in all statements across both case studies. These results confirmed the teachers-interviewees' responses about autonomous learners being good language learners. To them, learner autonomy in language learning manifests through a variety of activities such as watching movies in English, listening to music, using social media, and involving oneself in opportunities to learn and develop one's language skills, which explains the common consensus on all statements suggested in the

questionnaire. Perhaps, another point that could be drawn from the table above is that it confirms the matching findings of teachers in the two case studies, which essentially gave rationale to present the two case studies jointly.

There was only one discrepancy in the table above that was found between cases (1) and (2) which is with the last statement (38) about autonomous learners involved with English language clubs and associations. In that regard, while teachers from the first university seemed to have somehow neutral views about this element, and this was at a mean of 3.15, teachers in university (B) expressed their strong views about students' engagement in English language clubs and associations. This was at a mean of 4.15. Interestingly, the same statement also recorded a discrepancy in students' data in Section 4.5.2. In that section, it was hypothesised that students did not see that it was important for them to be involved in English language learning clubs and associations because they may have found other more useful alternatives. Nonetheless, the discrepancies that were highlighted between the data could be particularly useful for future research. The analysis in Table 22 also involved running a two-sample unequal variance T-test. The overall difference between the data from teachers in case (1) (Mean = 4.06) and case (2) (Mean = 4.37) scores was statistically insignificant, resulting in a P value of 0.22 which is greater than the estimated 0.05 alpha value. As a result, the null hypothesis of not having any statistical significance between the teachers' results in Table 22 was confirmed.

In the end, the takeaway from this section is that teachers expressed the importance of English language learning for students in the context of this study, as shown in the data from the questionnaire. This was also previously elaborated through the interview responses, where teachers admitted that they regard language learner autonomy as a pre-requisite that all students should possess, especially in the context of this research where having a good command of English language skills would facilitate the entire process of learning, which is often conducted in the English language. Having addressed this, the coming section presents how teachers' previous learning experiences influenced their current understanding of the concept of learner autonomy.

#### **4.13. The influence of previous learning experiences on teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy**

One of the questions that teachers were asked during their interviews was whether they were autonomous back in the days when they were students at university. In that regard, all teachers acknowledged that they were autonomous to different degrees in their learning. While some guessed that they were approximately 50 to 70 percent independent learners, there were only two teachers who did not consider themselves autonomous learners when they were students. They related their lack of autonomy to the difficulty of the subjects they studied, their lack of interest in the subjects being taught, and the lack of technological materials. However, what was noted in their responses is that they have changed that negative attitude towards learning since they became teachers. For instance, interviewee (5) from study case (1) said:

..., but now that I am a teacher and I have responsibility and students who depend on me now I feel like I am autonomous, I do research and I do whatever it takes to have understand what I am saying what I am doing for them.

##### **Teacher Interviewee 5, Case (1)**

As entailed in the quote above, the interviewee said that the nature of her job now compels her to be autonomous. The interviewees' comment tempts to open a new sphere of investigation, which is the role that pressure plays in being a stimulator for autonomous learning behaviour. The interviewee's comment also showed the role of the age factor in her autonomous learning behaviour after she became a teacher. This was also noted by interviewee (3) who referred to his age when he started his tertiary studies and said that he already had family responsibilities. According to him, he was as mature and independent in his personal life as he was as a student. Teachers' explanations of what made them perceive themselves as autonomous learners were classified in two directions, the first was their autonomous learning behaviour, and the second was the psychology behind it. Teachers described their autonomous learning behaviour as the following:

I did not rely just on what the teacher gave us I did my own research I looked in the library and online. I tried for example to see things that are not part of our

lectures and still relate them to what we have studied things that probably are not included in the syllabus. but all of that by directed by what I had in class

**Teacher Interviewee 2, Case (1)**

I was kindly going through the teachers' programs, but at the same time gaining knowledge from other sources. I developed self-reliance very early, I knew my advantages and weaknesses and more importantly how to keep my motivation flying high.

**Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (2)**

I used to revise from the handouts, when I don't understand something or a part in those handouts, I go and search on YouTube in particular when revising for civilization, I watch documentaries when I revise history, so I had my own learning strategies... Dictionaries too I used them a lot to explain and understand words and new lexis

**Teacher Interviewee 7, Case (1)**

The interviewees in the quotes above summarise the rest of the teachers' views of what makes them think that they were autonomous learners. Teachers mentioned looking for information from different resources to relate it to the lessons they studied inside the classroom. Also, teachers mentioned that the nature of the research they were doing is not confined to only what is studied inside the classroom; it involves all that can be related to the syllabus of the module and beyond that. Teachers also illustrated that they were autonomous in the sense that they worked hard in their studies. This hard work seems to be mainly reported outside the classroom, where most of their learning is taking place. Teachers also referred to some classroom-related practices that they used to describe their students' autonomous learning attitudes. For instance, interviewee (7) from study case (2) mentioned his active role inside the classroom in participating by sharing information and asking questions. On the other hand, interviewee (1) from the second case study said:

I was the facilitator of courses for my classmates. I provided them with less complicated versions of courses. I could perform a smoother version of the course with peers

**Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (2)**

Most practices that teachers reported so far were more or less individualistic, but interviewee (1) in the quote above uncovers the inter-dependent aspect of his autonomous learning with his co-cooperativeness in learning with his classmates. In his response, interviewee (1) mentioned that he had an active role in the classroom as a facilitator of information to his peers whom he learns with them interdependently.

Teachers also reported being genuinely interested in their learning, highly motivated, hard workers, creative, focused, and proactive in their learning. These characteristics were represented in their previous reported autonomous learning activities, and they are summarised in the following excerpt:

Because I view studying as something interesting, and I wasn't that interested in getting grades or marks I focused more on knowledge, to the point where sometimes I attend classes that are not even mine and I just hear the teacher and whenever I hear something new, I write it down. It means I am showing that I am responsible... outside the classroom I always use English with my friends, I put English to practice with my friends I text my friends on Facebook as well.

#### **Teacher Interviewee 4, Case (1)**

Teachers' psychology, which was described in their committed, focused, and highly motivated learning practices, pushed them to proactively engage in learning opportunities. Teachers reported that learning practices were very much personalised. For instance, interviewee (4) mentioned that he was attending courses that were not even his, and he was noting down vocabulary or words that he did not understand to look them up after the class ended; this showed a genuine interest and passion for learning.

Although teachers' descriptions of themselves as autonomous learners mainly revolved around the academic subjects they studied, they also reported some marginal language learning practices. For instance, interviewee (4) in the quote above mentioned his frequent use of English outside the classroom in his daily life. Other interviewees also said:

I always worked beyond the classroom. I read in English because internet did not exist at that time. I could be very autonomous if conditions were more favourable.

### **Teacher Interviewee 8, Case (2)**

because at that time we did not have the net we had only some books. and think I was autonomous because I really liked what I was studying, I really liked the English language and I wanted to read and do more in it, even during summer when we didn't have any sources and lectures to study. I wanted to read more about the language in order to master the language. I was listening to music, watching some films when they were available. apart from this we could not do a lot of things unfortunately that I am doing now.

### **Teacher Interviewee 1, Case (1)**

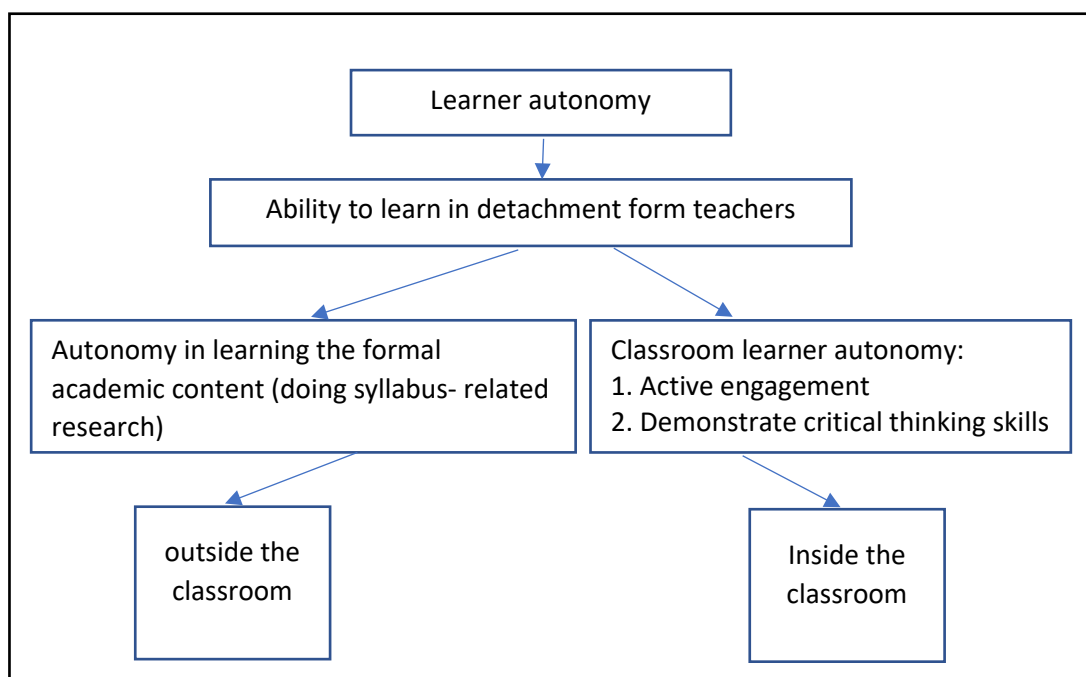
Interviewee (1) only referred to the efforts she made to learn the English language. However, the latter's response focused more on the hardships and difficulties she overcame to learn English than the actual language learning process. In other words, the fact that she managed to develop her language skills in a time when there was no technology to learn a foreign language shows that she was resilient and autonomous in learning English.

Asking teachers about what made them autonomous back in the day as students has enlightened the research about how teachers perceive learner autonomy. These findings were matched with the strictly academic view of learner autonomy that teachers presented in earlier sections of their findings. On that account, teachers' previous autonomous learning experiences could potentially influence their students' autonomous learning. In other words, teachers might only recognise autonomy in their students if they act autonomously in ways that they are familiar with. Having addressed this, and before moving to the discussion chapter, the coming section shall summarise the previously addressed interpretations of learner autonomy by the teachers-participants of this research.

#### **4.14. Summary of teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy**

After exploring what learner autonomy means to teachers, the concepts associated with it, and the characteristics and practices attributed to autonomous learners, this part aims to present a wholesome illustration of the teachers' findings. To do this, the following figure would be helpful to present a full image of how learner autonomy is interpreted by teachers in the context of this study.

Figure 11  
*Teachers' contextualised interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy*



Teachers' interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy were very much related to the students' role in achieving their formal academic goals. To begin with, teachers associated autonomous learning with independent and responsible learning. These two concepts were boiled down to students' having the ability to learn in detachment from their teachers, not fully detached from them in the sense that teachers' roles are ignored. However, it is in the sense that students willingly, independently, and responsibly engage in outside classroom learning opportunities to enrich their knowledge about their subject areas. This also involves students having a sense of awareness of their weaknesses and taking action to improve them. This interpretation of learner autonomy was associated with an outside classroom context where students are inherently free individuals. Teachers immensely stressed the independent research that students do, which has a positive influence on students' autonomous learning within the classroom.

Inside the classroom, teachers still associated learner autonomy with responsible and independent action under the teachers' supervision. In other words, students would operate autonomously not in the sense of doing research but in the sense of making mental efforts to stay focused inside the classroom and taking risks to demonstrate their opinions and ask questions inside the classroom. In this regard, students' research is of great importance in providing them with the necessary information to constructively engage inside the classroom.



In the end, teachers confirmed the core values of learner autonomy, i.e., responsibility and independence, which students also indicated in their findings. However, the significance of the findings by teachers is demonstrated in the strictly academic view of learner autonomy as a concept majorly associated with doing independent syllabus-related research and active engagement inside the classroom.

#### **4.15. Conclusion**

The current chapter presents the analysis of findings and interpretations of learner autonomy by Algerian master's students in the department of English and their teachers. The participants' interpretations were founded on a series of investigations about the meaning of the concept of learner autonomy to them and the characteristics and practices they associate with autonomous learners. The same chapter explored the different factors that shaped students' autonomous learning practices and their interpretations of the investigated concept.

Initially, all students in this research referred to themselves as autonomous learners and broadly interpreted the concept of learner autonomy as self-instruction and independence in learning. These two concepts were boiled down to defining learner autonomy as "the ability to learn by oneself," but with the possibility of asking for help in learning when needed. Findings of this research revealed that students reported that they are autonomous in different contexts and in various degrees depending on the learning goals that they aim to achieve and the setting where learning is taking place. As a result, goal-oriented and context-specific learner autonomy interpretations resulted from the data provided by students. In addition to this, investigations about the factors that influence students' autonomous learning practices confirmed the given interpretations of learner autonomy as relevant to their learning of the English language and to the academic subjects they study. Moreover, the factors influencing students' perceptions of learner autonomy were explored. These factors were found to be individual, socio-cultural, and socio-educational.

Teachers' interpretations of the concept of students' learner autonomy were framed as "the ability to learn in detachment from teachers." This interpretation correlated with that of students, as in "the ability to learn by oneself". However, students navigated through different interpretations of learner autonomy depending on the learning context and goals or

students, teachers' interpretations were chiefly relevant to the formal academic content they are responsible for. On the other hand, students' view of learner autonomy encompassed all directions of learning they had in different learning contexts they were involved in. Teachers' findings further showed that their understanding of learner autonomy could be the outcome of their previous learning experience. In that regard, teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy resembled their past autonomous learning experiences when they were students.

Lastly, the classroom context also witnesses some disagreement between what students and teachers see as autonomous learning. In this context, while students explained that autonomy occurs when listening to the teachers and critically thinking about the information given to them, teachers mostly viewed students' active engagement inside the classroom as an act of autonomy and defined the concept of learner autonomy in this context accordingly.

As a general concluding thought for this chapter, students viewed themselves as autonomous learners and proved the latter with evidence from both their personal lives and their academic learning context, which to them involves learning the academic content, and the language skills required for their success in their degree. While this gave a holistic understanding of learner autonomy, teachers' understanding of the concept was related to the observable learning endeavours that students make in learning the formal academic content that they study.

## Chapter Five: Discussion of the findings

### 5.1. Introduction

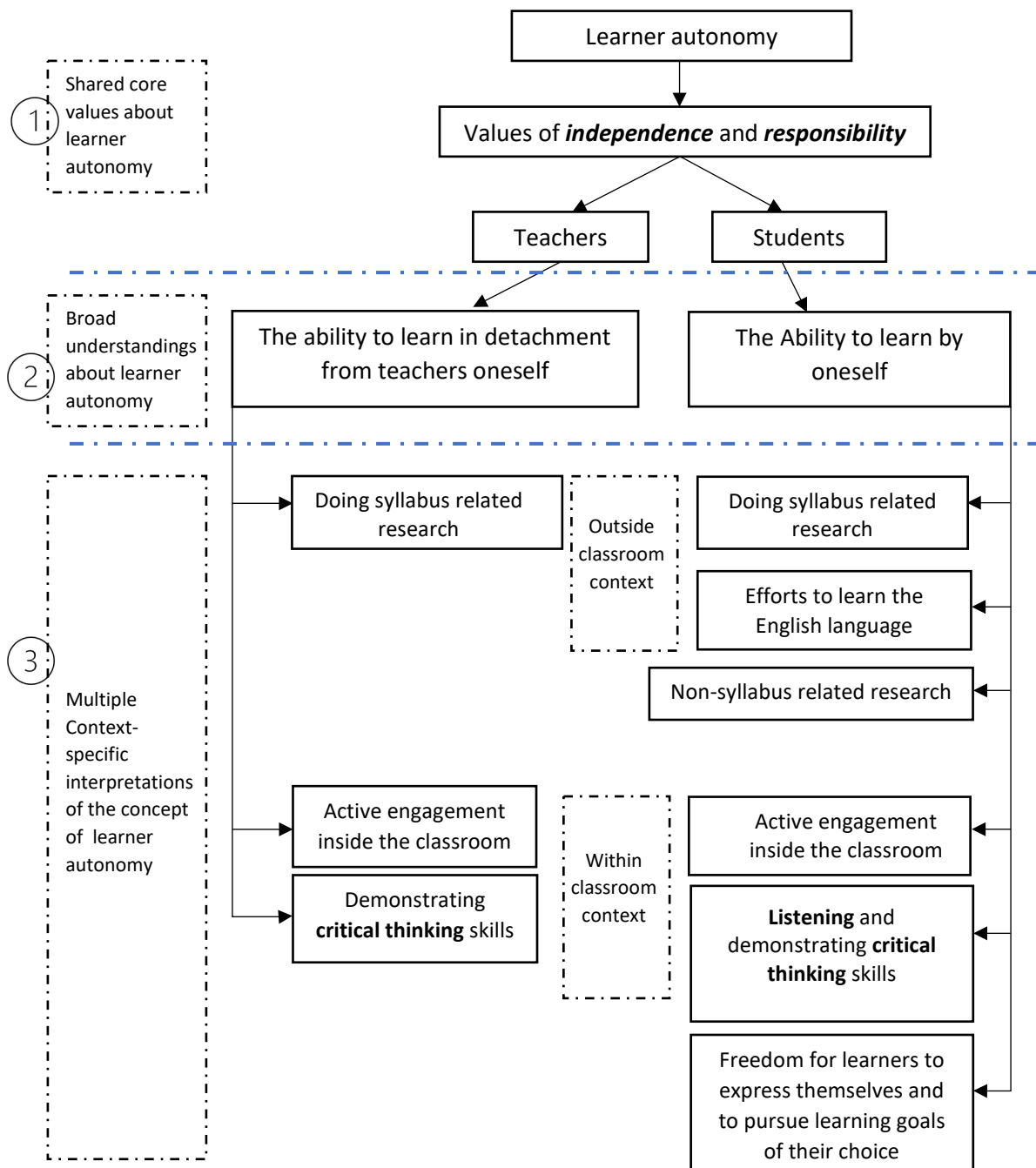
This chapter engages with the findings of this research. It first pulls together the different threads concerned with the values associated with learner autonomy, which contributed to conceptualising broad understandings of this concept. After that, the discussion addresses the multitude of context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy, which, although were based on common values about the investigated concept, they manifested in different ways. In addition, the current discussion is extended to the factors behind those understandings, context-specific interpretations, and those factors influencing students' autonomous learning practices. The discussion in this chapter further highlights the importance of considering learner autonomy both within and outside the classroom, especially since the latter plays a pivotal role in both students' and teachers' understandings and interpretations of the notion under investigation.

To reiterate, and before presenting any discussions, I shall commence this chapter by referring to the context and the main objective of the research that served as the impetus for this study. In this respect, the current research is conducted at two Algerian public universities, which are anonymized and referred to as universities A and B. The main objective of this research is to explore what learner autonomy means to students and teachers in the department of English at the two afore-mentioned educational institutions.

### 5.2. Reiterating on the research findings and mapping the discussion

The aim of this section is to re-introduce the findings of this research and demonstrate how these findings are organised and discussed in this chapter. In that regard, the following diagram is made to serve as a roadmap for the discussion chapter, which will help in making sense of the findings about the layers of understandings of learner autonomy as presented in the data analysis chapter.

Figure 12  
Findings organization and discussion mapping



The diagram above reflects the findings of this research. It is divided into three parts to which accordingly the findings in this chapter are discussed. The first part of the diagram highlights the two values i.e., independence and responsibility that students and teacher associated with the concept of learner autonomy. Findings about these values and how they connect to the wider research about the concept of learner autonomy will be the first to be discussed in this chapter. The second part of the diagram discusses students' and teachers' descriptions

of their understandings of the concept of learner autonomy, which were respectively phrased as “the ability to learn by oneself” and “students’ ability to learn in detachment from teachers”. This section of the discussion shall also address the factors that lay behind the broad understandings of learner autonomy given by students and teachers, thereby presenting clearer ideas about how the concept of learner autonomy is viewed by the participants of this research.

The third part of the diagram presents the multitude of context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy as within and beyond classroom context when achieving different learning goals. These make up the core contribution of this research about learner autonomy in the department of English in Algerian universities, and to the domain of learner autonomy in general. This discussion will also tackle the factors that influenced how students and teachers presented their context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy. In addition, the discussion extends to the factors that influence the extent to which students demonstrate learner autonomy, as this should help in further understanding what enables/impedes autonomous learning practices in the context of this research.

In the end, the above noted discussions about values, understandings, interpretations, and factors around the subject of learner autonomy are succeeded by two discussion sections that are not noted in the diagram above. The first tackles the importance of considering learner autonomy as a wholesome process that occurs within and outside the classroom, especially since this was highly emphasised by both group participants in this research (students and teachers). As for the second discussion, it aims to situate the findings of this study within the current learner autonomy research in the Algerian context and present the potentiality of projecting these findings in other similar contexts. Having briefly explained the components of this chapter and how they are organised, now I shall begin discussing the findings according to the order indicated in this section.

### **5.3. Shared core values and broad understandings associated with the concept of LA**

Both students and teachers in this research have primarily associated learner autonomy with values of independence and responsibility in learning. These values were recognised as fundamental and core components by the study participants, based on their understandings of the investigated concept.

As it has been noted in the literature chapter in section 2.3, the concept of independence in learning is often regarded as a near-synonym to learner autonomy, and it connects to the concept of responsibility too. This is mainly because autonomous learners are usually recognised by their sense of responsibility and independence. While the concept of responsibility could not be problematized in light of the findings of the current research, the concept of independence did present some issues that could not be overlooked. Admittedly, students mentioned several learning situations in which they viewed themselves as autonomous. Although students noted that independent action was of paramount importance to recognise autonomous learning, there were several learning situations, especially inside the classroom, where students explained that they are autonomous, yet they willingly rely on more knowledgeable others, i.e., teachers. As a result of this, the findings about the value of independence in learning call for re-evaluating the relationship that students and teachers have made between this concept and learner autonomy. In that regard, the findings showed that, when looking closely at learning situations, learner autonomy could be achieved while students are in a state of dependence on others who are more competent and knowledgeable. Therefore, students do not need to be independent in their learning all the time as long as their dependent learning behaviour springs out of their sense of responsibility and awareness that their decisions to rely on their teachers are in their best educational interest.

The two concepts, i.e., independence and responsibility, were salient in both students' and teachers' findings, and they also connected to the literature about learner autonomy. For instance, Holec (1981) definition of "taking charge of one's own learning" (p. 3) implies that learners first assume responsibility for their learning, then (totally/partially) depend on themselves in the conduct of their learning (Teng, 2019). Such findings reinforce the idea of having a shard and perhaps a universal core value for the concept of learner autonomy. In this respect, Candy (1988) acknowledges that "...there may well exist a generic or a trans-situational sort of autonomy in learning" (p. 74).

Noting that there are similarities between what individuals think of learner autonomy helps in finding a sensible understanding of what this concept means. Nevertheless, although students and teachers agreed on these core values of learner autonomy, they expressed what learner autonomy means with some important nuances. Students in this research generally

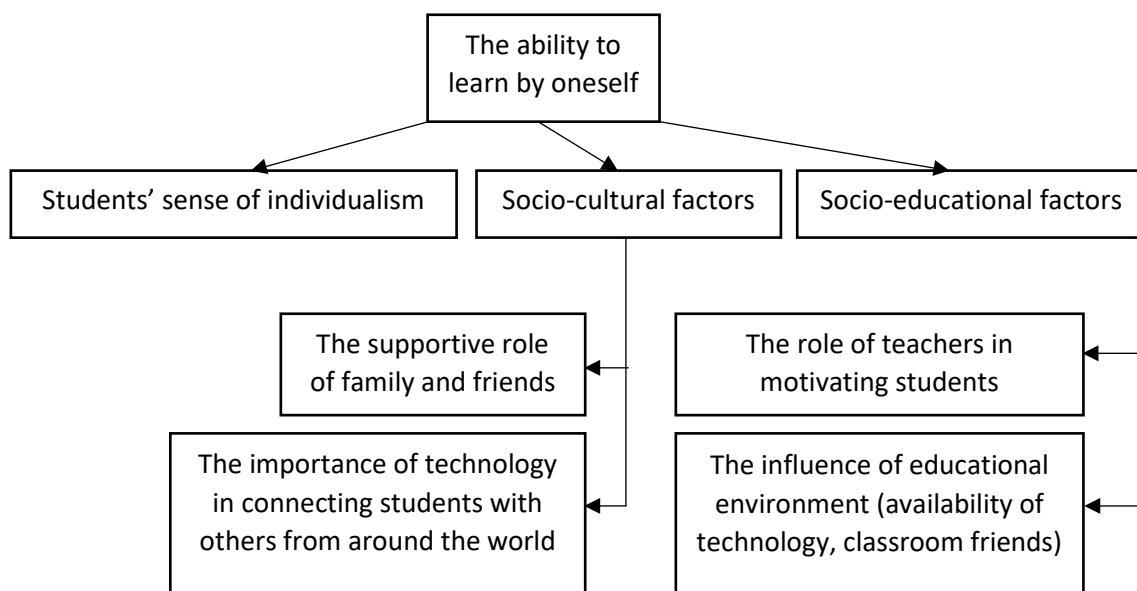
described learner autonomy as having “the ability to learn by oneself.” As for teachers, they framed learner autonomy as in “the students’ ability to learn in detachment from teachers.” Although these two themes might to some extent look alike, each implies distinct views about learner autonomy, which will be presented and elaborated in the coming sections.

### 5.3.1. Students’ understanding of LA as “the ability to learn by oneself”

Students’ views about learner autonomy were phrased as in “the ability to learn by oneself”. Perhaps the first thing that could be noted about this theme is that students in this study refer to learner autonomy as an ability that they can enact to different degrees under different circumstances.

It is one of the aims of this study to identify the factors that shape students’ understandings of the concept of learner autonomy. These factors not only help in explaining how students understand learner autonomy but also in giving rationale for why they think of learner autonomy the way they do. The findings from students in this regard were mainly categorised into three factors namely, sense of individualism, socio-cultural, and socio educational. These factors are first presented in the diagram below, then discussed in the proceeding sections.

Figure 13  
*Factors influencing students’ understandings of learner autonomy*



### **a. Students' sense of individualism**

Students' understandings of learner autonomy were illustrated as in "the ability to learn by oneself" which indicates a dimension of individualism. In this regard, findings in this research revealed that much of the effort that students associate with learner autonomy seems to be attributed to individual actions and characteristics. For instance, when asked about what makes them see themselves as autonomous learners, students' responses focused on individual learning activities, which they expressed using the pronoun "I". The students mentioned listening to music, watching movies, and using social media to communicate with native speakers when it comes to learning the English language. When learning about the academic content that is part of the students' course, they referred to the research that they do by themselves outside the classroom. As for classroom learner autonomy, it is coined in the mental processes that they exert individually to understand the lessons they are taught. In this regard, Guerra and Wubbena (2017) illustrated that beliefs and practices are fundamentally interrelated and have a bidirectional influence. In another study by Albarracin and Wyer Jr (2000) it was noted that past and present behaviours influence the individuals' conceptualizations of attitude and beliefs. In line with these thoughts, the students' individual learning practices in this study ultimately influenced their understandings of the concept of learner autonomy, which led them to conceptualise it as learning by oneself.

As indicated earlier, Algerian students are often described by their collective attitudes in learning. However, such conclusions seem to be very inclusive. In fact, in the findings of this research, students demonstrated a recognisable level of individualism in their learning in different situations. Students' sense of individualism is informed by the socio-cultural factor, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **b. Socio-cultural factors**

While the literature places much emphasis on individualism as a trait connected to the concept of learner autonomy (Little, 1991), this study adds an important insight into the socio-cultural construction of the individual. In this respect, the study participants are based in Algeria, where the literature often draws on the collectivist mindset of its society, which often does not support individualistic values (Berrezoug, 2021). In other words, learner autonomy as an individualistic feature in this research was found in a society that is often viewed as collectivist.



To begin with, what characterises collectivist societies is their strong relational ties with their families and members of the community. In this regard, Lakehal (2021) noted that “the Algerian society has relatively low individualism and a strong sense of collectivism. This means that the Algerian culture gives also more emphasis to the family and groups where the “we” is always superior to the “I”.” (p. 67). However, in the case of this research, although students demonstrated strong ties with their family members, the role of the family was noted as a positive factor supporting autonomy, especially in educational matters. In that regard, students’ autonomy in this research was demonstrated in a variety of domains that entailed their personal learning endeavours, which they performed willingly and individually. In this respect, Ampadu (2015) explained that this is a narrowed perspective and a fixed categorization of culture, which is not something static or homogenous. In other words, not all components of culture fall under the same category of collectivism. For instance, the supportive role of family for students was mostly apparent in educational matters, in which students were encouraged to assume responsibility and to act independently as learners. Such upbringing influenced students’ understanding of learner autonomy, which they explained in relation to values of individualism that may not represent the typical picture drawn of their society as collectivist.

Besides the role of family in supporting students to seek knowledge, the second argument that can be laid is that students have been unconsciously pushed to be individualistic, and it is both society and technology that played a role in this. For instance, when speaking of autonomy in learning English, society does not provide space or accept the use of the English language. This encouraged students to look for alternative opportunities to learn the English language. When doing so, students reported that they willingly rely on music, movies, news, and social media, which present authentic materials used to learn English. Such learning endeavours of students in a developing country do not only evidence their autonomy in learning English, but they also develop students’ autonomy in English language learning (Warni et al., 2018). At the same time, these authentic language learning materials present opportunities that enable students to become more aware of values associated with western societies, including values of individualism (Beresova, 2015). Therefore, the sample of this study is not simply the product of solely the Algerian society. However, they are also the product of globalization, which gave them easy access to other cultures through the use of

technology. Although this argument may seem to contradict what is proposed in this research about the existence of an inherited autonomy within Algerian students and teachers, this proposition does not neglect the latter, and it furthermore acknowledges the paramount influence of the global culture to which students have access through the English language.

In the end, students' sense of individualism and their individualistic actions contributed to their interpretations of autonomy in its pedagogical and political sense within and beyond the classroom context. However, before moving to the following section, it would be absurd and risky to assume that students of this research are always individualists in all domains. In this respect, it would be more reasonable to say that students showed a proclivity to demonstrate individualist attitudes in learning situations. Nonetheless, students' sense of individualism was balanced in the sense that they sometimes resorted to collectivist attitudes by asking for help, considering other people's pieces of advice, and engaging in collective learning projects with their peers when this best served their learning agendas, all depending on the learning task, condition, and context. Having acknowledged this, the coming section addresses the role of the socio-educational factor in shaping students' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy.

### **c. Socio-educational factors**

The socio-educational environment in this research highlights the influence of teachers and the students' current educational experiences. Firstly, students mentioned that they listen to their teachers, who often advise them to depend on themselves in learning by doing research outside the classroom, and by deepening their knowledge using different learning resources. The students noted that their teachers are very straightforward in recommending independent and collaborative learning outside the classroom. In this regard, Setyoningrum and Handayati (2020) found that students are more likely to be active and happy when following teachers who have a positive influence on them. In line with this thought, the support from those teachers that students admire has informed the latter's views about the significance of learner autonomy to them in the department of English. This was reflected in the emphasis that students put on their independent learning outside the classroom as a form of autonomy, which is what teachers also seemed to agree with. Besides this, students' educational experiences also seemed to play a role in shaping their understanding of learner autonomy. In this regard, all students noted that their current learning experiences at the

university have been the most autonomous in comparison to their previous educational stages. This goes back to the nature of education at the university level, which by default requires autonomy in the sense that students often need to do research as part of their course. In addition, most courses that students are enrolled in at the university prepare them to write a final year project, which also necessitates a high level of autonomy and research skills. Effectively, learning at university puts them in a position where they need to enact their disposition of autonomy to succeed. In the end, the presented socio-educational factors seem to influence how students think of learner autonomy as an ability influenced by their teachers' practices and recommendations and circumstantial educational variables.

After discussing the factors that influence students' understanding of learner autonomy, the following section tackles the influence of teachers' previous educational experiences on their current perception of learner autonomy.

### **5.3.2. Teachers' understanding of LA as "the ability to learn in detachment from teachers"**

In their explanation of what they mean by "learner autonomy," teachers emphasised the need for students to be able to support their learning without extensive involvement from their teachers or tutors. Although this also implies students depending on themselves, which is how they described learner autonomy, teachers' explanation mostly highlighted the need for students to depend less on teachers. In other words, according to teachers, students can rely on other people like peers, friends, and this would still make them autonomous; hence, their understandings of learner autonomy do not revolve around the idea of absolute individuality or isolation.

What can also be noted in the teachers' understandings of learner autonomy is that while students' explanation of learner autonomy addresses learning in general, teachers' findings revolve around the academic subjects that they taught. The findings revealed that teachers' explanations of learner autonomy were mainly founded on their previous learning experiences, which will be tackled in the upcoming section.

#### **a. The influence of the teachers' previous learning experiences**

One of the objectives of this research was to figure out what factors influence teachers' understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. The findings of the current study showed that teachers mainly referred to their learning experiences to explain what learner autonomy

meant to them. Teachers were asked various questions, like if they had any discussions about learner autonomy in professional development sessions, conferences, or if they had read about this notion. However, in their responses, teachers mostly referred to their autonomous learning experiences as students. Such results seem to mirror the findings from Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014), who noted in their work that teachers defined learner autonomy from perspectives that reflected their diverse learning experiences as students.

Although previous learning experiences played a role in forming teachers' perceptions of what the concept of learner autonomy means, another factor that emerged from the teachers' data was their experiences as learners and their expectations from their students. In other words, how teachers think of learner autonomy also mirrors the teaching objectives they aim to achieve. This could be referred to as a socio-educational variable, which students also noted in their findings. In the end, it was the teachers' previous learning experiences, and their expectations of what students should do to attain their learning objectives that seemed to have contributed to their understanding of learner autonomy, as in the students' "ability to learn in detachment from teachers." Having addressed this, the next section will discuss the findings from students about the contextual interpretations of learner autonomy.

#### **5.4. Students' context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy**

Students' interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy were identified in four main areas, depending on the learning contexts and the learning goals that the participants identified. These areas are, learner autonomy in personal life, autonomy in learning the English language, autonomy in learning academic content subjects, and autonomy in classroom learning. Interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy that were found in the afore-mentioned areas are illustrated in the following sections:

##### **5.4.1. Learner autonomy in personal life**

Unlike previous research that tends to situate learner autonomy in formal learning settings (Egel, 2009), the participants in this study perceive learner autonomy as a trait that they draw upon in a wide range of contexts and social domains including their very own personal lives. On multiple occasions, students in this research described themselves as "self-taught by nature" because they were eager, willing, and capable of learning more about domains that trigger their interests. The students-participants gave many examples of this. For instance, learning computer programming, learning about the science of dermatology, and learning

languages. In all these examples, the students-interviewees mentioned that they assumed responsibility for their learning and acted independently to learn based on their own interests. According to students, in these situations, they demonstrated autonomous learning since they did not need to be nudged when it came to developing their intellect and skills. To them, this is autonomy in learning in personal life, which clearly takes place beyond the classroom and the educational system. Autonomy in personal life seems to mirror “autonomy as a learner” as suggested by Littlewood (1996). Autonomy as a learner describes those who make use of learning opportunities beyond the educational context, such as the ones reported in this study. According to Littlewood (1996), this type of autonomy helps learners think and learn independently in different areas of their lives.

Developing learner autonomy in personal life is a desirable goal in modern societies (Clifford, 1999; Ma & Gao, 2010), it is an integral outcome of learning for most university courses (Henri et al., 2018), and it is a skill that employers expect from graduates in their workplace. Autonomy in personal life can also be plugged into Candy's (1991) personal autonomy, which refers to the autodidaxy of the individual as the non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in an informal setting. This reflects the learning situations and practices that the student-interviewees described in their interpretations of learner autonomy beyond the classroom context. Autonomy in personal life also intersects with the second interpretation of learner autonomy presented by students, which concerns learning the English language. This will be discussed in the coming section.

#### **5.4.2. Autonomy in learning the English language**

In Mideros (2021), language learner autonomy was illustrated as a matter of students engaging in meaningful actions to enhance their language learning. As reported in the findings chapter, English was a big part of the student-participants' personal lives. Their use of English was more personalised and powered by their interest in the language than it was related to their studies. In that regard, autonomy in learning English was complex as it appeared in personal learning endeavours that bear implications in a formal educational context. In other words, students' learning objectives in this aspect were to gain native-like English language skills, which explains their keenness to involve English in their personal lives. However, this element inevitably has some academic implications for students' journeys at university because they are based in the department of English and their courses are in the English

language. In this situation, students have demonstrated a genuine desire to improve their English that was accompanied by a need to perform well in their academic context, in which English is a means of communication.

The practices that students reported in the interviews and the questionnaire in relation to autonomous language learning mostly took place outside the classroom context. The participants gave examples of using English when listening to music, watching movies, playing video games, and using social media. This extensive and deliberate use of English demonstrates how personalised the process of learning this language happened to be for them. On that account, they interpreted learner autonomy in this context as initiating language-related activities, that are performed independently/interdependently beyond the classroom. Learner autonomy, as described in this section, corresponds to the plethora of learner autonomy research that chiefly takes place in the language learning domain. Students' interpretation of learner autonomy in language learning correlates to Littlewood's model that proposes "autonomy as a communicator". To Littlewood (1996), "autonomy as a communicator depends on (a) the ability to use the language creatively; and (b) the ability to use appropriate strategies for communicating meanings in specific situations" (p. 431).

Autonomy in learning the English language as viewed by the student participants is also consistent with other definitions, such as the one by Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987) and Benson (2013). In all these definitions of learner autonomy, students assume the responsibility to manage all aspects of their language learning, which is what the study participants reported doing outside the classroom. Students' ability to develop their language skills in detachment from any teaching authority reflects Dickenson's description of "full autonomy". This also fits within Littlewood (1999) model of "proactive autonomy" in which he notes that students have full control over what/how/when to learn and what strategies to use. In short, the view of learner autonomy that students seem to present in learning English is full or "absolute autonomy" in which they have no ties with any other authority to impose regulations or direct their learning. Full autonomy is the highest degree of autonomy when learning, and it is not conditioned by a formal learning context; rather, it is a personal pursuit. In this respect, Lamb (2011) explained that successful language learning continues to be a personal struggle, demanding a high level of autonomy and access to relevant resources, which by no means are found in abundance outside the classroom context.

Students' interpretations of learner autonomy could be further problematized by exploring the type of language that students aim to attain. In this regard, findings showed that autonomous language learning activities by students were informal, as in watching movies, listening to music, and speaking to foreigners. These autonomously performed language learning activities may not raise up to the academic level required in their formal education. At their level at university, students are required to write essays and deal with sophisticated subject specific knowledge. Therefore, it is critical for them to engage in academic English (EAP) learning endeavours that require the use of formal language and style. In this respect, students acknowledged that they had subjects that taught formal writing and speaking skills. This, per se, is a domain of learning in which they demonstrated autonomy. However, in ways that differ from their personal English language endeavours but are more similar to other academic content modules that make up part of the students' degree (see Section 5.4.3).

In the end, the currently discussed findings once again show how important it is to consider learning goals when understanding what learner autonomy means. In the case of this research, interpretations of learner autonomy were noted to be different even in the one domain of learning English. While students' efforts to learn general English were personal and mostly took place outside the classroom context, formal English learning took place inside the classroom under the supervision of teachers in ways that are similar to learning academic content modules. Although these two domains of learning entail different learning practices, settings, hence different interpretations of what learner autonomy means in each context, these two domains remain close because the language that students learn outside the classroom via music and movies inevitably informs and helps in their journey of learning academic English (EAP). Having explained this, the coming section discusses interpretations of learner autonomy that address the academic subjects that make part of the students' course.

#### **5.4.3. Autonomy in learning academic content subjects**

The students-participants in this research are taught different modules like civilization, discourse analysis, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and methodology. These modules hold a language learning aspect because they are taught in English. However, regardless of how important the language aspect is, the focus of students in these modules (subjects) is on the academic content being taught. The importance of content modules is also highlighted in a

study by Houha (2017) who noted that students with low autonomy find content modules difficult. He also illustrates that in such modules, “students -who lack autonomy- seem to be ignorant of the fact that such subjects require that the learners read extra materials to expand their understanding and gain deeper insights about the treated themes to be able to discuss them.” (p. 44). In other words, success in content modules fairly depends on the autonomous learning efforts that students invest beyond the limited time and materials offered to them in the classroom context. In the same vein, interpretations of learner autonomy for students in the context of this study revolved around doing research about the topics they discuss inside the classroom and revising the lessons taught. Learner autonomy in academic content can be matched with “subject-matter autonomy” in Candy (1988) where he argues that autonomy fairly depends on the subjects-matter that students learn, he illustrated that it should not be surprising to find that a learner may be judged or thought of as autonomous in one domain, yet as lacking in autonomy in other fields of study.

In light of the academic subjects that the study participants identified, learner autonomy was interpreted in the sense that students willingly and independently go beyond the coursework prescribed in their curriculum. This is by furthering their knowledge about the topics they discuss inside the classroom. This interpretation seems to mirror Littlewood's (1999) model of “reactive autonomy” which describes a situation where learners react to the learning paths that are defined for them by teachers or tutors. Although this model was made for language learning contexts, it can still inform contexts where language is not necessarily the primary learning objective. Littlewood’s “reactive autonomy” is often seen as a lower version of autonomy in comparison to “proactive autonomy” in which students are responsible for creating their learning paths. This study questions the validity of such a view, particularly the fact that each learning path is subject to its own affordances and limitations. On that account, Candy (1988) notes that “epistemological independence is highly context-specific.” A learner who is very competent, experienced and knowledgeable in one domain may be a complete novice in another area, and must accordingly function dependently, at least at first.” (p. 61). This brings to light the need for teachers to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to learn autonomously. Although by doing this, Candy would be justifying students’ dependence on their teachers, at least in the first stages. However, he considers it a necessary step for students to develop an understanding of their domain and its limits



before navigating it. In the same vein, Hand (2006) explained that it would not be reasonable not to rely on more knowledgeable others who can offer help and contribute to making one's learning more effective. Hand (2006) expanded more on his view on learner autonomy when he explained that one should act autonomously or heteronomously depending on their circumstances, spheres of expertise, and organisational roles. In light of this description of learner autonomy, reactive autonomy, as described by Littlewood (1999) is not necessarily a sign of having less autonomy in learning. However, it is a necessary step that students go through before learning about new areas of their studies. Reactive autonomy seems to match students' interpretations of learner autonomy in learning about academic content subjects in the sense that they did not cancel the integral role of the teacher in creating learning paths and guiding students through them. In addition to that, students' need for teachers is not because they are unable to create their learning paths, because they clearly do that when learning the English language and when achieving their personal learning goals. However, to them, it was about feeling more confident about teachers' decisions since they are subject specialists. Therefore, it could be concluded that the concept of choice in learner autonomy is only relevant when students have enough experiences and background about the subject matter that they are choosing from so that their choices are not based on luck or feelings, but based on their informed opinions.

In the light of the issue of decision making in learner autonomy, Pennycook (1997) raises the concern of only associating autonomy when students take part in making learning decisions. He says, "my concern is that such move (deciding to depend on teachers in some aspect of learning) may not be considered 'autonomous' if autonomy is only understood in terms of independence from teacher direction." (p.43). Pennycook's argument demonstrates how misleading views of learner autonomy could be. These views which cancel the option for students to willingly decide to adopt teachers' plans. In this regard, (Benson, 2008) explained that if a person gives up willingly their freedom of choice in some aspect of learning, this does not necessarily mean that they gave up their autonomy. In other words, a person could choose to hand over the responsibility to someone else for different reasons, like the lack of time or knowledge about the domain learned, and this does not mean that their autonomy is impaired. In this regard, Mineishi (2010) noted that "for many writers, proactive autonomy - in which learners assume responsibility over their learning choices- is the only kind of

autonomy that counts.” (p. 235) and this requires a re-evaluation of what is genuinely considered as autonomous learning. Moreover, the student-interviewees in this study noted that sometimes the learning objectives are not even initiated by teachers, but are given in a pre-defined syllabus by the ministry of higher education. In this case, the discussion of learner autonomy escalates to address emancipation from the ministry of higher education rather than the control of teachers.

Thus far, it would be safe to say that students have academic learning goals that are initiated inside the classroom. However, these goals are to be realised beyond the classroom, where students are meant to research their classroom topics. Academic content learner autonomy seems to present an example of the co-existence between autonomy and paternalism. Such a system was favourable to students, who believed that a certain level of control from the teachers’ side is appreciated to work as a safeguard for students’ interests. For this section, I have already mentioned that students’ findings of academic content autonomy reflect Littlewood's (1996) model of “reactive autonomy”. However, I argue that dependency on teachers who are subject specialists to make learning directions clear for students is not an indication of less autonomy from students’ part. However, it is a necessary step for students to gain some basic knowledge to be able to carefully navigate their domain and the subjects they study. In that regard, the transcendence to more proactive type of autonomy in learning is noticed when students are engaged in their final year projects, where they are put in positions to hold responsibility for all the decisions concerning their work with a marginal involvement of teachers over the conduct of their research projects.

Students’ interpretations of autonomy in learning academic content subjects mainly revolved around doing outside classroom research. Besides that, they also expressed having different interpretations of learner autonomy that took place within the classroom context, which will be discussed in the following section.

#### **5.4.4. Learner autonomy inside the classroom**

The literature about learner autonomy puts a particular focus on the classroom context where it is believed that learner autonomy is best promoted (Abd Rahman et al., 2022; Egel, 2009). Classroom learner autonomy is often viewed as a learning approach for students to develop a proactive learning behaviour that they can adopt beyond the classroom and in different domains in their personal lives, as relevant to the socio-cultural dimension of learner

autonomy suggested by Oxford (2003). In the case of this research, students have previously demonstrated autonomous learning behaviours in their personal lives. This raises the issue of whether there is a need for learner autonomy-supportive behaviour inside the classroom or not since the goal of enabling students to engage in learning outside the classroom is to some extent already met. Nevertheless, the shift to more learner-centred learning that characterises modern day education invites for autonomy within the classroom context, and this had led educators to consider promoting learner autonomy within the specific classroom context.

The classroom is one of the most controversial settings where learner autonomy is discussed because of the conflict of authority within the classroom, which has sparked a hot debate among researchers and educators about the extent to which learner autonomy should be promoted. This debate opens the door for different possible interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy in a highly political setting. This debate manifested itself in the findings of this research in the present study, where learner autonomy was interpreted as in the observable learning behaviours and the unobservable mental processes that students exert when learning inside the classroom. In addition, learner autonomy was interpreted from a political perspective that reflected students' freedom in learning. These three classroom directions for learner autonomy are illustrated in the following sections.

***a. Students' active engagement inside the classroom***

In the findings of this research, students stressed the importance of willingly taking part in classroom discussions, making learning suggestions, asking and answering questions, and raising debates when time allows for it. Such active engagement of students within the classroom entails a sense of freedom for students to reflect on what they study in a constrained academic context where they need to achieve pre-defined learning objectives. However, this freedom does not involve them creating new learning paths under any circumstances. Therefore, this falls within Littlewood (1999) model of "reactive autonomy". In this respect, none of the student-interviewees of the study referred to the responsibility of students in the classroom in creating academic learning goals or even assisting in such matters. Consequently, the role of learners inside the classroom is to actively react to what teachers say. This also, resonates with Ecclestone (2000) who argues that learner autonomy

can take the form of a learner being more proactive within an existing predefined system of rules.

While students in the two case studies highlighted the importance of active engagement in learning inside the classroom, a different aspect of learner autonomy emerged. The latter gives importance to the unobservable cognitive learning processes that students autonomously enact to understand the lessons and the information in the academic content that they study.

***b. Learner autonomy as a cognitive process***

Students' descriptions of themselves as autonomous learners inside the classroom also involved the internal unobservable learning processes that occur in their minds. This involves them paying attention to teachers and critically thinking about the lessons being delivered. This is traced back to Quinton (1971) who recognised “cognitive autonomy” which is achieved when learners develop a capacity for criticism of authorities and of their personally informed beliefs. In the case of this research, the student interviewees explained that they do not need to participate all the time, and they are not passive learners just because they are not constantly speaking inside the classroom. In this regard, Scharle and Szabó (2000) give examples of being autonomous by suggesting “paying special attention when the lesson is about something that the learner is not good at” (p. 4). In this research, learner autonomy is frequently associated with observable learning behaviours like making comments, asking questions, and solving problems that students agree on. However, students also highlighted the mental processes that they experience as an act of autonomy, which is something that was not noted in the teachers' findings. Moreover, students explained that their participation is deemed useful when the focus is on enabling them to express themselves in the target language. However, when the learning goal changes to acquiring new information, space is allowed for them to concentrate and reflect on the information being taught.

Students learn more effectively when they are mentally present, and critically thinking and imagining what happens if the variables change. In that regard, Candy (1988) 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). Therefore, to students, it is an act of autonomy at the level of thoughts to deliberately activate those mental processes in understanding the lesson even

when they do not share their thoughts. In this regard, Candy (1991) stated that “autonomy is equated with critical intelligence, independence of thoughts, and judgement” (p. 103). In other words, when students actively listen to teachers, raise questions, and have intrapersonal conversations about the lesson. This itself is an act of autonomy, even when it is not projected in observable learning behaviours on the spot.

The students’ interpretation of learner autonomy as a cognitive capacity could also be linked to the model of Benson’s (2013) and Little’s (1991) description of learner autonomy, where there is a reference to the notion of control over the “cognitive processes”. The latter entails that autonomy implies students enacting brainstorming and being mentally engaged with the learning materials. Consequently, they would develop awareness about their learning and understand the task at hand. The view of learner autonomy as a cognitive process highlights the need for autonomous learners to have critical, reflective and reflexive thinking, which, according to Gao (2013), are important for learner autonomy to be enacted. Eventually, these intellectual competencies will explain why autonomous learners are characterised by their intelligence, which is often nourished by critical thinking skills.

In the end, the student interviewees considered themselves autonomous because of the mental efforts that they invest inside the classroom, whether their thoughts are shared or kept for themselves. The discussion about learner autonomy at the level of the mind is an area that students can elaborate more about. However, this area of research remains impoverished for academics who can only refer to the reflection of the mental autonomous processes that students may or may not exert inside the classroom.

### ***c. A political dimension for learner autonomy***

The concept of learner autonomy originates from the domain of political philosophy (Benson, 2013). Therefore, it is inevitable to address the political aspect when discussing autonomy in learning, especially inside the classroom context where a conflict of authority often arises between students and teachers. To begin with, the fact that such a debate was pulled off by students evidences their awareness of the importance of their voice inside the classroom, which reflects learner autonomy in its political sense. The findings of this research showed that students viewed themselves as autonomous in the sense that they have the freedom to share their opinions, even if they contradict those of teachers. Students recognised the

importance of having a voice inside the classroom, and their participation was not seen as a pedagogical endeavour for effective learning but as a political right they could exercise.

Students' discussion about the political aspect of learner autonomy inside the classroom moved to a more extreme level, where they argued that autonomy exists not only in their right to share their opinions but also in their right to refrain from engaging in inside classroom activities. Autonomy in this sense was viewed in its most liberal perspective, where it is no longer from the perspective of learning pedagogies, rather an issue of freedom to make choices that best suit students. Students seem to bring out a view of learner autonomy that highlights them as agentive individuals with the ability to identify and pursue valued goals in ways that serve them best. This view is often overshadowed by the concept of active learning. This matter was brought to light by Pennycook, who said that:

There does not seem to be much space for the possibility of a student who independently chooses to come to a teacher to learn and would prefer that teacher to teach in a 'teacherly' way. My concern is that such a move on the part of student might not be considered 'autonomous' if autonomy is not only understood in terms of independence from teacher direction.

(Pennycook, 1997, p.43)

Students in this research advocated listening to teachers because they are more knowledgeable about the information and explanations given, which are more likely to be in exams. This has been identified by Yashima (2014) as "autonomous dependency" which denotes the dependence on trusted and knowable others who can help students reach their goals. In this case, students would need to listen to teachers inside the classroom to assimilate the knowledge they are being taught. The best example in this situation is given by the interviewee (8) in case (1) who said that there will always be a need for teachers because they are subject specialists.

The political aspect of learner autonomy makes the concept notoriously difficult to define since it sheds light on the issue of power and decision making. This leads to the question of whether learner autonomy is a psychological and a pedagogical phenomenon with political implications or the other way around (Little, 2003). In this respect, Pennycook (1997) refers to the process of "psychologisation" of learner autonomy, where the concept loses its political

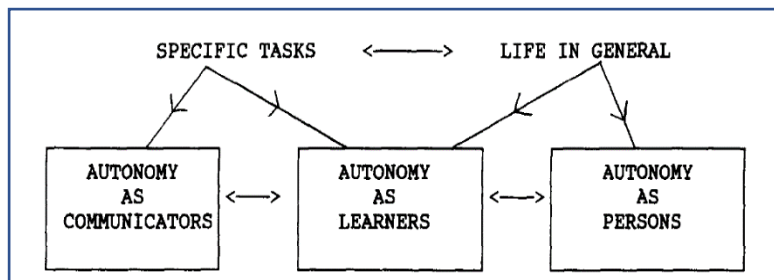
traits, and the focus is on exploring the learning strategies for autonomous learning. The findings of this research show that the political aspect of learner autonomy might not have the heaviest presence in students' interpretations, but it is always there, particularly when autonomy is concerned with learning in a highly structured environment such as the classroom.

Overall, the classroom context seems to bring to the surface the conflict of power between students and teachers. Before jumping to the next section where I discuss learner autonomy as interpreted by teachers, I shall note that these categorizations about contextual interpretations of learner autonomy are made upon varying differences in the participants' opinions. In other words, not all students reflected all these interpretations of learner autonomy, which is very reasonable because students simply strive to learn, hence act autonomously in what they need to develop the most. Eventually, this leads them to prioritise the learning paths that they see as important. For instance. Some of them demonstrated a high level of English language proficiency during the interviews that were conducted. In that respect, they revealed that they always use materials when learning the English language, and this made them autonomous language learners by default. These students also noted that they feel that they are no longer learning the English language. However, they are more interested in the academic information that they study in the classroom, where English is simply the language of instruction (EMI). This realisation again brought back the issue of whether students in this research are to be referred to as "EFL learners" or perhaps an alternative labelling should be considered given the complexity of their learning goals, which the label "EFL" does not fully reflect.

#### **5.4.5. An illustrative model for students' learner autonomy**

Students' interpretations of learner autonomy in this research were found in four main contexts, as indicated in earlier sections in figure six. These contexts contributed to tailoring learner autonomy according to the affordances and the constrained where the concept was practised. In this regard, the given interpretations were organised in a model that presents the domains on which learner autonomy interpretations were based and explains how the different given interpretations influence one another. Perhaps, the closest model that presents areas of learner autonomy as found in this research is the one by Littlewood (1996) which is presented in the diagram below:

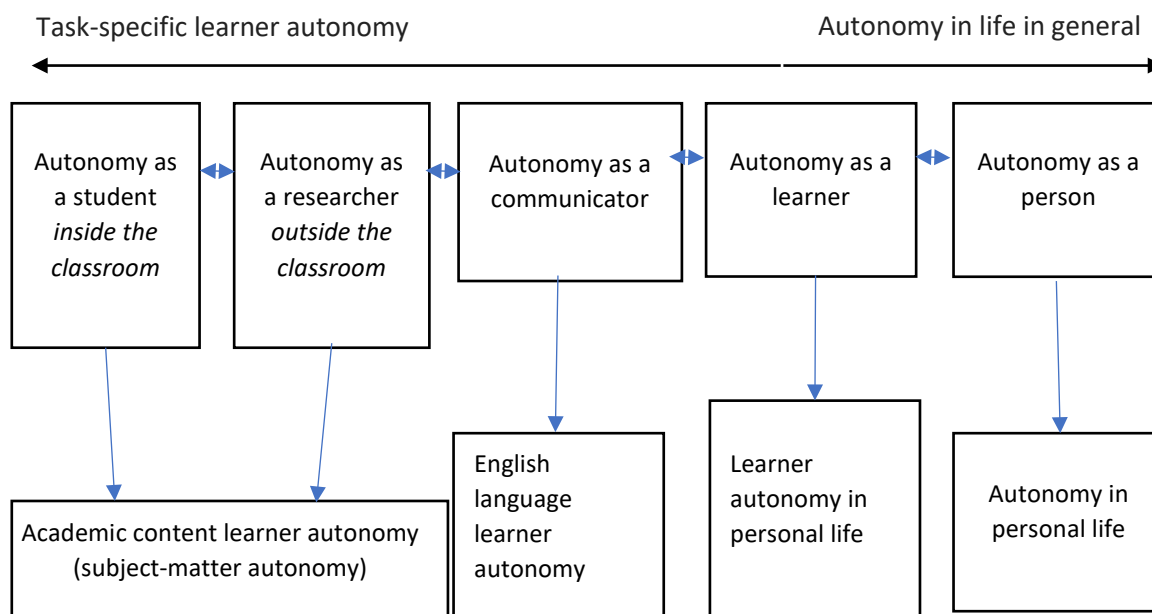
Figure 14  
*The relationship between domains of learner autonomy*



Note. Sourced from Littlewood (1996, p. 430)

The issue with this model is that it is based on a language learning objective for the purpose of enabling students to communicate successfully in a foreign language. In the case of this research context, it is not only language learning that is the concern of both students and teachers, but also the academic content that students receive, which they are assessed on, and which they are meant to graduate with. Having explained this, I suggest a framework that goes along with the one proposed by Littlewood (1996), but at the same time, it acknowledges other non-language related goals that shape how learner autonomy is perceived.

Figure 15  
*The relationship between areas of learner autonomy (the case of Algerian students in the departments of English)*



The chart above summarizes the areas of learner autonomy and the direction of their influence as inspired by Littlewood’s model. First, “autonomy as a student” reflects the



classroom context where students are taught academic content in designated modules. As elaborated in previous sections, learner autonomy inside the classroom was interpreted in three main ways; in participating inside the classroom, in active listening and critical thinking, and in students' political freedom to share their opinions inside the classroom. "Autonomy as a student" shares the same ground with "autonomy as a researcher" (The word researcher in this context is used to refer to the type of learner who is required to do research outside the classroom). Autonomy as a student and as a researcher falls into the category of academic content learner autonomy since in both cases academic content is targeted. Nonetheless, learner autonomy as a researcher is concerned with students' efforts in doing syllabus-related research beyond the classroom context.

The third domain is autonomy as a communicator, and this comes as a reflection of the students' voluntary efforts in empowering their language skills. This area also appears in Littlewood's model, which mainly focuses on "language learner autonomy". While the previously mentioned areas of autonomy are associated with specific learning goals and practices, the fourth domain named "autonomy as a learner" is general in the sense that it covers "the ability to engage in independent work (e.g., self-directed learning); and (b) the ability to use appropriate learning strategies, both inside and outside the classroom" (Littlewood, 1996, p. 431). This domain is identified in this research as learner autonomy in personal life (see Section 5.3.1), and it can be matched with the concept of life-long learning, in which students are able to mobilise their learning skills across various learning situations and domains.

The last area for learner autonomy is "autonomy as a person," which is about the critical role individuals have in governing their own lives and the making of society. The relationship between the different domains of learner autonomy is marked at the bottom of the chart, where one can see that when moving to the right-hand side of the chart, the term "learner" disappears, and is replaced with "person" In that situation, learning domains of autonomy feed into one's personal life, which makes critical citizens with their own independent thoughts, decisions, and actions in society.

In the end, the chart above expands on Littlewood's work by adding academic content learner autonomy, which is of significance to students in this study. However, it may not be of the same importance to students in other contexts where language learning is more prominent

than academic subject learning. Finally, highlighting the correlations between domains of learner autonomy and identifying areas for autonomous learning provide an understanding of how this concept works in different specific contexts. Therefore, more goals oriented, and context-specific measures can be taken to promote learner autonomy in this specific context and beyond.

### **5.5. Teachers' context-specific interpretations of learner autonomy**

Teachers are an important part of students' socio-educational environment. In fact, teachers sometimes spend almost a third of their day in the classroom with students. Therefore, their views about what learner autonomy means to them were worthy of taking into account. In that regard, teachers' findings of their context-related interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy were illuminating in the sense that they partially matched those proposed by students. Teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy were confined to the formal academic content that they teach in the modules they are responsible for. More illustrations about how teachers interpreted the concept of learner autonomy are presented in the following section.

In their findings, teachers referred to students as autonomous when they willingly engage in syllabus-related research outside the classroom context. Apparently, this was also how students interpreted learner autonomy when the goal is to learn the formal academic content. As indicated in earlier sections, autonomy in learning the formal academic content resembles Candy (1988) suggestion of subject-matter autonomy, where students' objective is to develop their knowledge about a particular academic domain. I mostly refer to Candy's model here because it acknowledges the need for students to be guided in their education when they are exposed to a new domain. Subject-matter autonomy also provides a rationale for the different learner autonomy practices that the teachers suggested in this study. For instance, methodology teachers suggested that autonomous students put their research skills into practice. However, ESP teachers advocated that an autonomous learner would take the initiative to apply the knowledge he/she studies by developing a learning syllabus for learners of English for specific purposes. As for teachers responsible for oral and written expression modules (which are taught to licence students), they regarded students who are highly interactive and actively use English in the classroom and in their daily lives as autonomous. Such examples show that what is considered autonomous fairly depends on the position of

the viewer and the learning goals he/she aims to achieve. The suggested examples about what learner autonomy means to teachers add more depth to the investigated concept. To teachers, learner autonomy is not only about students doing module-related research, as framed at the beginning of this section, but also about willingly applying the theoretical knowledge that students learn in real-life situations. This eventually presents an ideal academic view of learner autonomy in which students' academic learning is their only concern. This view is not only idealistic from the teachers' part, but it also cancels other non-academic varieties of learner autonomy that concern students' personal learning endeavours.

Besides the interpretation of learner autonomy as willingly conducting academic research, teachers also referred to some autonomous learning practices and attributes within the classroom context. These practices and characteristics contributed to making a classroom context's interpretation of learner autonomy. In this regard, teachers explained that the classroom context is for students to be exposed to new information and get guidance so they can operate by themselves when doing research outside the classroom. In the same vein, teachers acknowledged that students are not to decide what or how to study inside the classroom, yet this can be negotiable in certain situations. However, it is mainly the teachers' responsibility to decide the programme, and sometimes the programme is drafted by higher authorities. For such reasons, models of learner autonomy in which students are invited to take part in the process of making decisions about the learning objectives and content inside the classroom do not seem to reflect the current context. However, it is subject-matter autonomy that comes back to the surface of this discussion again, with emphasis on the need for teachers' guidance when students are novices in new educational domains.

To teachers, classroom learner autonomy is about students' active engagement inside the classroom, which matches students' findings of their autonomy in the sense of informing the classroom discussion. Nonetheless, the issue to be addressed in the teachers' findings is that they only recognised autonomy in the observable learning behaviours occurring inside the classroom. By doing this, they would be presenting a short-sighted view of learner autonomy that neglects all cognitive and political learning endeavours, which adds complexity to learner autonomy in the academic context.

In the end, teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy can be summarised as being strictly academic since they do not include students as individuals with potential for autonomy in other non-academic contexts. This made teachers only focus on students as researchers of their formal academic content. Besides this, when referring to classroom learner autonomy, teachers mostly focused on the observable learning practices of students. In other words, students' political view of learner autonomy and the cognitive processes that they volitionally and purposefully performed when learning were not acknowledged as acts of autonomy in learning. In addition to all this, teachers did not highlight language learning in their interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy. The language was rather a means for a higher order of autonomy, which is academic content autonomy, which teachers regarded as the main objective of students.

## **5.6. Factors influencing students' and teachers' contextual interpretations of learner autonomy**

It has always been the goal of this research to highlight the importance of the learning context when understanding what learner autonomy means to different parties. After exploring interpretations of learner autonomy by students and teachers in the section above, it is high time to refer to the findings about the factors that made students and teachers interpret learner autonomy the way they did.

Interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy in this research were categorised into learner autonomy in personal life, in learning the English language, in learning the academic content that make part of the students' course, and in classroom learning. This categorization depended on three main factors, namely, the learning/teaching objectives aimed to be achieved, the students/teachers' expected roles, and the learning setting (within/outside the classroom). These factors as discussed in the following three sections.

### **5.6.1. Learning/Teaching goals aimed to be achieved**

Students' interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy were expressed in relation to specific learning goals. Students have provided details about the importance of this factor, saying that their autonomous learning behaviour is guided by the aims they try to achieve. For instance, students who lack the required language proficiency seem to prioritise and invest more in developing their language skills because the language aspect is an integral

ingredient in understanding the lessons they are taught and in conducting research. The importance of recognising learning goals and how they influence students' direction of autonomy is highlighted by several researchers in the literature about learner autonomy, like Thanasoulas (2000) and Kumaravadivelu (2003). The latter says that "autonomy is not context-free, that is, the extent to which it can be practised depends on factors such as learners' personalities and motivation, their language learning needs and wants, and the educational environment within which learning takes place" (p. 134). Students' needs and wants is another way to indicate the learning goals that they try to fulfil. In this study, students' learning goals were identified as both enhancing their language skills and reinforcing their academic content knowledge about the different modules they study.

Although students were clear about their understanding of their learning objectives, there is no official document that clearly states what students' objectives are within one course (module). In a recent study of a "literature course" for students in the department of English at Algerian universities, Belal and Ouahmiche (2021) noted that "when reading the Algerian literature course, one may realise that the course objectives are stated vaguely. The overall aim of the course is absent; besides, the kind of skills and competencies, which students should acquire by the end of the course, are not highlighted" (p. 334). Although this could be intentionally left for teachers to have some autonomy in interpreting the course objectives according to their understandings, this argument does not stand much because teachers are confined by limited content in the classroom that is usually dictated by a central administration (Belal & Ouahmiche, 2021).

As it was previously noted, learner autonomy is interpreted in ways that serve the fulfilment of learners' aims and objectives. In that regard, a lack of transparency in what students are meant to be aiming for would create a situation of chaos where students do not understand what is required of them or might resort to having their own understandings of their learning objectives. As a result, this situation does not only create a mismatch between what students and teachers regard as the assigned objective(s) that are aimed to be researched at the end of the module(s), but it could also lead to different interpretations of what responsibilities students and teachers have and potentially a mismatch of interpretations and confusion about what learning autonomously entails for these educational parties.

### **5.6.2. Students'/Teachers' expected roles**

Students and teachers make part of an educational system and an environment that often dictate what each should do to reach assigned goals. In the case of students in this research, the findings showed that in the classroom, students were expected to listen to their teachers, participate in debates, and ask questions when clarifications were needed. Outside the classroom context, students highlighted their role in furthering their understanding of the lessons they study. Students noted that their educational responsibilities do not end when they leave the classroom. In fact, outside classroom settings mark the beginning of the students' research obligations. Students' interpretations of learner autonomy were framed within these learning roles, which they acknowledged. For instance, because students accept that it is part of their duty to listen to the teachers' instructions, they willingly and consciously do this as an act of autonomy on their part. As a result of this, learner autonomy is interpreted within the framework of the learning roles and responsibilities attributed to students.

Just like students, whose interpretations of learner autonomy differed depending on how they were expected to behave with regard to their learning, teachers also had a set of expectations to meet and comply with. For teachers, the findings showed that they embrace the dynamics of the classroom, where they operate as guides, motivators, supporters for their students, and illustrators of the content that they teach. At the same time, teachers did not abandon their position as instructors within the classroom. These roles that teachers played reflected their interpretations of learner autonomy as a concept that entails complying with the teachers' instructions, so learner autonomy does not mean that students go against the mainstream curriculum taught at university. However, teachers' roles also entail supporting students' engagement inside the classroom, which provides a space for challenge and room for students' intellect and skill development. Effectively, this is also how learner autonomy was recognised and interpreted by the teachers-participants in this research.

### **5.6.3. Within/outside classroom learning settings**

Learner autonomy is often discussed in the domain of language learning more than in any other field (Basri, 2020; Jarwis, 2013). However, what also should be noted is that the discussion about learner autonomy is often discussed in a classroom setting where autonomy is usually sought to be promoted (Benson, 2011). On the flip side, outside the classroom, learner autonomy is less paid into attention. The difference between within and outside

classroom learning contexts manifests at the level to which learner autonomy can be practised and the autonomous learning practices that could be demonstrated in each context. First, students reported more learning materials outside the classroom, which means more opportunities for learning. Secondly, there is no conflict of power between teachers and students outside the classroom. Therefore, students can pursue their preferred learning goals in ways that serve their own learning agendas. Ultimately, this gives them greater control over the learning process. Thirdly, when students and teachers described learner autonomy-supportive practices, most of the practices that they mentioned were by default associated with an outside classroom context. This gave the impression that learner autonomy is a concept that naturally emerges outside the classroom, where students already have the freedom to initiate and manage their own learning.

Having acknowledged that beyond the classroom context is a place where students already have natural inherited freedom, then it would be safe to say that it is also the place where students' autonomy can be fully demonstrated. Students would not need to follow someone's narrative or way of learning. Hence, they would be creating their own learning directions and genuinely controlling all aspects of their learning. However, regardless of the discrepancies between within and outside classroom contexts, students' understanding of learner autonomy does not involve one context without the other. On multiple occasions, students in this research regarded the outside classroom context as an extension of the classroom. For students, the classroom was to have bullet points and some guiding lines about the topics they studied, but the actual learning process is when research is made once they leave the classroom. Also, if we are to talk about English language learning outside the classroom context, the students have an abundance of opportunities to practise their language in real-life situations using authentic materials. Hence, they would not only be language learners but also users of the target language.

### **5.7. Factors influencing the extent to which students demonstrate autonomous learning practices**

Describing the factors that influence the extent to which students' learner autonomy is practised was a tricky process since interpretations of learner autonomy differed according to the context and the learning goals aimed to be achieved. Nevertheless, findings from this research were categorised according to what Tran and Duong (2020) proposed as "personal

factors, academic factors, and external factors” (p. 198). These factors are addressed and discussed in the following sections:

### **5.7.1. Personal factors**

Winwood and Purvis (2015) argue that learner autonomy is not static, and that different learners express different levels of autonomy in the same context and under the same conditions. In the same vein, Little (1991) notes that learner autonomy is a personal construct in its essence. Therefore, personal factors play an integral part in successful autonomous learning endeavours. First, motivation is by far the most influential factor in either impeding or boosting learners’ autonomy. The influence of motivation is proved by the reciprocal correlation it has with autonomous learning, one feeding the other. Findings of this research go along with others by Ushioda (2011) and Liu (2015), in which motivated learners proved to exert more autonomy in their learning. In addition to that, motivation (internal/external) in this study is triggered by a variety of sub-factors like, employability, access to technology, attitude toward the language, and interest in the lessons being taught. All these provided motivational elements for students to act more autonomously in their learning.

Besides motivation, the findings of this research showed that personal characteristics also have an impact on the extent to which learner autonomy is enacted. Students' persistence and their sense of independence and responsibility in learning were all marked as supportive traits for them to act and develop language and study skills independently. In this regard, Jiang (2008) confirmed that “although individual factors consist of many components, personality and previous experience appeared to be the most salient aspects, as revealed by the present study, that affected students' learner autonomy and associated behaviours.” (p. 306). In other words, individual factors, particularly personality traits, have a significant influence on students’ sense of autonomy in learning.

### **5.7.2. Academic factors**

In both participants’ findings, there was a reference to learner autonomy in the academic context of students. Such context inevitably bears factors that shape students’ autonomy in that domain. The first of the academic factors that influence students’ autonomy is the teachers’ classroom practices. Educational research recognises the teachers’ key role in promoting for the notion of learner autonomy. In this respect, Little et al. (2017) argue that teachers should use pedagogical approaches that aim to promote learner autonomy.



Similarly, Egel (2009) noted that “experimental research has shown that teacher style effects learner motivation, which in return affects learner autonomy” (p. 2025). The critical impact that teachers have in influencing students’ autonomous learning practices is also acknowledged by Idri (2012), who is one of the pioneers of learner autonomy in the Algerian context. In this regard, Idri noted that students focus on the teachers’ use of successful pedagogies and their mastery of the taught subject and its content. Such findings confirm the results of this research, in which students highly emphasised the teachers’ roles in the classroom.

In this study, academic factors also include the academic content that students engage with. Students noted that they are less likely to further their knowledge about some subjects if they are not interested in them. For this reason, Benson (2013) holds firm views about the necessity of involving students in deciding the content to be learned. Although the findings of this research hold the learning content accountable for determining students’ level of autonomy, both students and teachers acknowledged that deciding the content to be learned is not the responsibility of students. However, a matter of such importance is left to subject specialists.

The last factor in this category is the educational environment. All research participants referred to the lack of resources, technology, and even the loss of interest in learning among many students who come to university to waste time. The educational environment was described as a frustrating factor for students. However, the same students said that they developed persistence, and no longer see their educational culture and environment as limiting. Nonetheless, they also admitted that they would be more engaged in a place where they have access to technology, the internet, learning resources, and students who have a genuine interest in learning.

### **5.7.3. External factors**

The afore-mentioned factors (personal and academic) seem to have a direct impact on students’ autonomous learning. However, external factors have more of a remote influence on autonomous learners. First, students reported that family plays a role in supporting them in their journey at university. Students’ families provide the financial and moral support that motivates them to improve their learning. Students also referred to their upbringing, which contributed to their curiosity and commitment to learning. As a result, they aspire to make

their families proud. The influence of families on students' autonomous learning behaviours can also be found in several studies. For instance, Basri (2020) noted that family background and the wider socio-cultural values that encourage independence consequently encourage autonomous learning.

The other external factor in this category is the lack of technological resources at the university. However, this was opposed by the influential use of technology by students beyond the university and the classroom context. In that regard, all students in this study acknowledged the role technology plays in shrinking distances between students and the English-speaking communities that they expressed an interest in. Moreover, students' use of technology was not only to improve their language skills, but also to attain information and skills to achieve personal and/or academic learning goals. The influence of technology on autonomous learning behaviour was addressed in works like Lai (2019), where he illustrated how 'language learner autonomy' is amplified using technology. In that regard, Lai (2019) says "the relationship of technology and autonomy is a dynamic, bidirectional one where autonomy influences how learners perceive and position technology in relation to language learning, and technology impacts the exercise and development of autonomy." (p. 53).

Having briefly mentioned all these factors, it is important to add that not all areas of learner autonomy were influenced by the aforementioned factors. For instance, interest in the culture of the target language was a motive for students to act autonomously in learning English, but it was not found to be valid when students furthered their knowledge about the academic content they studied. Moreover, some factors were more influential than others. This observation incites us to leave space for individual differences when examining to what extent autonomy manifests. In the end, such findings are consistent with the calls that this research makes for contextual investigations about the notion of learner autonomy.

### **5.8. Learner autonomy beyond the discourse of "within/outside classroom LA"**

An eye-opening finding in this research is that both students and teachers broadly associated learner autonomy with outside classroom context in their initial responses about their understandings of the concept of learner autonomy. In fact, the outside classroom context was the only place where learner autonomy was described in its absolute form, i.e., proactive autonomy, where students are not supervised by any authority, and are willing and able to

interdependently reach their learning objectives. Although the outside classroom context plays a critical role in students' and teachers' interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy, its role is often overshadowed by the classroom context, where most of the literature about learner autonomy is found (Egel, 2009). Admittedly, such a narrative more or less undermines the significance of autonomy for students beyond the classroom, which should be equally if not more important than autonomy in the classroom contexts.

Perhaps one of the issues worth investigating is why the discourse about learner autonomy mostly takes place inside the classroom. There are many reasonable arguments for that. For instance, when students exert autonomous learning skills within the classroom, they are more likely to transfer those skills beyond the classroom context. In other words, classroom learner autonomy can help students become autonomous learners outside the classroom context and in their lives in general. However, the validity of this argument is questioned, especially if we are discussing "proactive autonomy" in which students hold responsibility over all aspects of their learning. For instance, the students-interviewees in this research reported engaging in autonomous learning outside the classroom in learning English, and in both learning academic and non-academic domains. Of course, I wish not to push this argument beyond its reasonable limits and say that students of this research are the ideal autonomous learners, or they will not benefit from autonomous learning endeavours inside the classroom. However, for the students in this research, the goal of enabling them to engage in outside classroom learning is already met without being proactively autonomous learners inside the classroom in the sense that they need to create their own learning directions.

As it has been argued throughout this study, learner autonomy is present and manifested in different ways that are tailored to the necessities of the learning context and the objectives of learners. In light of this thought, it would be useful to remember the quote by interviewee (2) from Case (1) who summarised the relationship between within and outside classroom learner autonomy. He said:

In my opinion being an autonomous learner is actually a lifestyle. It is not about being inside or outside the classroom, but it is about how you want to grasp the information

**Student interviewee 2**

The interviewee in the quote above clarified that he does not view learner autonomy in terms of inside and outside the classroom context but as a wholesome process in which the two contexts complement each other. This is in the sense that students receive guiding information from their teachers inside the classroom and then expand on it outside the classroom context. In other words, following their teachers' lead inside the classroom does not necessarily make them passive as long as they can expand on the information beyond their formal educational context. Benson (2008) explains this situation by noting that if learners willingly give up their freedom to make choices in their learning, this does not necessarily mean that they gave up their autonomy as a whole or that their autonomy is impaired. However, they are relinquishing their "situational freedom" by handing over the responsibility to more knowledgeable others due to many reasons, like a lack of time or experience. This situation reflects the viewpoint of a number of students in this research, where they clearly indicated that teachers are the subject experts, and it would be absurd not to take what they say in the classroom into account. The argument presented by Benson indicates that learner autonomy is more complicated than a checklist of responsibilities that learners must take in order to be autonomous, and that autonomous learners do not need to be autonomous at all times and in all situations (Benson (2012). In light of this thought, the connection between students' autonomy within and outside the classroom could be made.

To conclude, a connection between the classroom and beyond the classroom setting needs to be established as both contexts serve a higher form of autonomy, which is "personal autonomy" (Benson, 2012) as its purpose is to contribute to the making of responsible, critical, and independent learners and individuals within the community. Having said this, the section aims to situate the findings of this research within the discourse of learner autonomy in the Algerian context.

### **5.9. The research findings in the light of learner autonomy discourse in Algeria**

As it has been demonstrated in the rationale of this research, the discourse about learner autonomy in the Algerian departments of English at the university level often addresses "Language Learner Autonomy". The latter reflects one aspect of the student's learning goals, mainly because students in such contexts are based in the faculty of foreign languages. However, as the findings of this research entail, it is subject matter autonomy that students are concerned with, and it is also subject matter autonomy that is addressed in the LMD

system. On that account, a mismatch is addressed between what learner autonomy research in this context revolves around and what the higher education system LMD documents entail about learner autonomy. In such a situation, this research intervenes to consider both language and academic content aspects of learner autonomy for students in the department of English at Algerian universities. This is based on two facts. Firstly, students learn some academic content subjects in modules that are not relevant to learning language skills. Secondly, students are taught in English, which is also a medium of communication in their course. Therefore, learning or improving one's English language skills is also established as a goal by itself that students aim to achieve.

This research also recognises learner autonomy in personal life, which is marked as an end goal for graduates from higher education institutions. The latter entails critical thinking skills that enable students to have their own independent thoughts rather than passively following certain narratives. This aspect of learner autonomy resonates with the political-critical dimension of learner autonomy that Kumaravadivelu (2003) also refers to as liberatory autonomy, which calls for the making of critical thinkers in society. In light of what has been discussed, the political aspect of learner autonomy needs more investigation in the Algerian context since the impact of autonomy on one's social life was not the main focus of this research.

In the end, this research adds to both language learner autonomy research and subject-matter autonomy, which the current study invites to recognise in learner autonomy research in similar contexts to this one. This present research also shows that although these two domains of learner autonomy overlap in some respects, they remain distant areas of research that should be addressed separately, each with its own merits. In addition, investigations in the Algerian context tend to shed more light on the classroom context, which ends up missing the bigger picture of learner autonomy that entails enabling students to be lifelong learners. This research responds to this issue and invites researchers to consider the different perspectives from which learner autonomy could be viewed as suggested in the model proposed for the context of the present study (see Figure 13).

### **5.10. Conclusion**

The current chapter discussed the findings from the data analysis section by making a link between the research results and the theoretical frameworks about the concept of learner autonomy and other research in the Algerian context and beyond. Overall, the chapter showed that students and teachers demonstrated a broad understanding of the concept of learner autonomy that is similar to what is widely known in the literature about this subject. However, interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy emerged when the concept was associated with a variety of learning goals and learning contexts. The current chapter also discussed the factors that influence understandings and interpretations of this concept and those factors that influence students' autonomous learning practices. In the end, the current chapter reported and rationalised students' and teachers' voices about the notion of learner autonomy. This eventually enriched the research with suggestions and recommendations about optimal ways to promote learner autonomy based on students' and teachers' explored experiences and views.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

### 6.1. Introduction

In the concluding chapter, I first present a summary of the main findings that provides answers to the proposed research questions of this study. This chapter also highlights the research implications and its contribution to the field of learner autonomy. In addition to that, it gives suggestions inspired by teachers' and students' data about how to maximise students' autonomy in the learning contexts recognised in this research. In the end, the chapter also presents reflections on the limitations of this work, suggests some recommendations for further learner autonomy research, and concludes with some final words from the author of this project.

### 6.2. Summary of the key findings

This research explores a context-specific understanding of the concept of learner autonomy in the department of English at two Algerian universities. The research took place in a context where students are often viewed as lacking autonomy in their learning (Fedj & Benaissi, 2018; Ghout-Khenoune, 2015; Idri, 2012; Senouci, 2019). In that regard, current research argues that learner autonomy is context-specific (Hurd, 2005; Schmenk, 2005; Wang, 2016). Therefore, investigations about the realities of the concept of learner autonomy, i.e., what it means and how it is practised, should take place before concluding whether or not students are autonomous and prior to making any intervention to promote such a notion.

The findings of this research showed that students and teachers initially shared a common ground when explaining what learner autonomy broadly means to them by referring to the values of “independence and responsibility in learning”. To students, learner autonomy is “the ability to learn by oneself”. As for teachers, it is “the ability to learn in detachment from teachers”. These two illustrations broadly match widely accepted definitions of learner autonomy in the literature (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981; Little, 1999a; Littlewood, 1996). This compatibility of illustrations supports the universality of the concept of learner autonomy as a humanistic capacity (Little, 1999b), a capacity that is “available to all, although it is displayed in different ways and to different degrees according to the unique characteristics of each learner and each learning situation.” (Benson, 2013, p. 2). In that regard, controversies about learner autonomy were found in the details. In other words, although the participants of this

study presented a matching general understanding of learner autonomy to the values around this concept found in the literature, the reported characteristics and practices associated with learner autonomy were tailored to the goals, expected roles, and settings where learning occurs. Consequently, more contextualised and diverse self-perceived interpretations started to emerge. These interpretations did not negate the broader understanding of learner autonomy in any way. However, they highlighted different learning paths, which provided descriptions for more context-specific and goal-oriented learner autonomy.

To begin with, there were three main points that students and teachers seemed to agree on when illustrating the meanings of learner autonomy. The first is that learner autonomy is a concept that primarily concerns the outside classroom context. In this regard, both students and teachers see that learner autonomy is realised in its absolute form beyond the classroom context, where students are free to direct their learning. Secondly, learner autonomy is constructed upon values of responsibility, inter/independence. The research participants used these values to define the concept of learner autonomy and stressed their usefulness in recognising autonomous learners. The last point was individual learning endeavours. Although this was much more apparent in students' findings, teachers also stressed the role of individual learning efforts as a sign of autonomy in learning. The research findings also showed that teachers' previous educational experiences are the main influence on their current understanding of learner autonomy as an ability for students to detach from teachers when learning. In that regard, teachers explained that when they were students, they were able to rely on themselves to further their knowledge about their field of study. This illustration of learner autonomy by teachers, along with their current perception of this concept as relevant to values of independence and responsibility in learning. Besides this, findings from students showed that their broad understanding of learner autonomy was informed by individual, socio-cultural, and socio educational factors, which are discussed in the previous chapter.

The purpose of this research is to investigate what learner autonomy means to students and teachers in the department of English in two Algerian universities. In that regard, a multitude of contextual interpretations resulted. Firstly, students' interpretations of learner autonomy were associated with a variety of learning objectives, personal, language-related, and syllabus-related (within and beyond the classroom context). As for teachers, they only



highlighted autonomy in learning in the academic content of those modules they teach. Teachers' interpretations of learner autonomy also occurred both within and beyond the classroom context. Although these contexts or perhaps domains where learner autonomy was identified seem distinct from one another, they are all based on shared understandings of learner autonomy as presented earlier. Therefore, these contextual interpretations only differ in terms of practices and the degree of responsibility and freedom for independent action allowed in each context.

Students identified learner autonomy in their personal lives, where the concept is interpreted in its most absolute form when learning non-academic learning skills and information. In this regard, students are fully responsible for creating their learning paths, the materials and strategies they use to learn, and their evaluation techniques. All this is done without the interference or help of any teaching authority, unless it is requested by the students themselves. The second learner autonomy domain is the students' language learning. In this aspect, students affirmed the confluence between their personal interest in learning the English language and their need to learn English since it is the medium of instruction (EMI) in their formal academic education. Therefore, language learner autonomy in this aspect is about involving oneself in all possible opportunities (mostly outside the classroom) to learn the English language.

While the above-explained interpretations of learner autonomy were found only in students' data, the last two domains about learning formal academic content within and beyond the classroom context were highlighted by both students and teachers. In this regard, learner autonomy was first interpreted as doing research and furthering one's knowledge outside the classroom about the academic content taught in the formal classroom context. Learner autonomy here entails students' ability and willingness to transfer their quest for knowledge from the classroom context to their personal lives. In this situation, students do not create new learning paths, but they adopt the objectives pre-defined by educational authorities.

Thus far, all interpretations of learner autonomy have taken place outside the classroom context, where students depend on themselves with little or no guidance in learning. As for the formal classroom context, it inherently implied rules and instructions, which made students and teachers interpret learner autonomy in different terms. In this regard, students and teachers only expressed their consensus on the learners' active participation in classroom

discussions as a form of autonomy. Within the same context, students noted that autonomy can occur at the level of thoughts when students attentively listen to teachers and engage in thoughtful mental processes to understand the lessons taught. In addition, students also noted that autonomy can be explained from a political perspective, especially if the purpose of learning is to give students the freedom to express their own opinions and thoughts within the classroom context.

The current research also sought to explore the factors that influence students' interpretations of learner autonomy and those factors that influence their autonomous learning practices. In that regard, findings revealed that the learning goal and the setting where students learn have a major influence on how autonomy is interpreted. For instance, the more personal the learning is, the more autonomy students demonstrate in their learning. Moreover, settings like the classroom encapsulate students' interpretation of learner autonomy, as in engaging in classroom discussion and having awareness and critical thinking about the information delivered. As for the extent to which students demonstrate autonomy in their learning in the previously explored domains, this was associated with three main factors that were categorised as 1) personal factors, i.e. students' motivation, personality, and previous educational experiences. 2) academic factors, i.e. the role of the teacher, the academic content that students have, and the educational environment of students, and 3) external factors, i.e. the motivational role of friends and family, and the availability of technological resources. All these factors varied in their impact on students depending on the context of learning and the learning objectives that students aimed to achieve. Having presented this brief summary of the main findings of this groundwork, the coming sections will discuss the theoretical and empirical implications of this research.

### **6.3. Research implications**

Drawing on the discussed findings, this research is expected to have some implications for students, teachers, and researchers who are interested in the field of learner autonomy and educational research in general. To begin with, this research echoes students' voices about learner autonomy. It potentially enables them to become aware of the different paths to learner autonomy that they have in their learning contexts. This work also articulates the roles that students have in developing their autonomy within and outside of the classroom context. Moreover, the suggested learner autonomy practices explored in this research can introduce

students to learning practices that may potentially help them improve their autonomous learning experience.

This research also concerns teachers in the department of English at Algerian universities. It first shows that they are not familiar with the different manifestations of learner autonomy, which transcend the academic aspect. Therefore, this study can raise awareness about other varieties of learner autonomy besides the one that concern the observable academic content learning endeavours that teachers strongly emphasise. This includes autonomy in learning the English language, when achieving personal goals outside the classroom, or when simply engaging in active listening and brainstorming when a lesson is being delivered inside the classroom. Being aware of all these paths for autonomous learning would give teachers areas based on which they can tell if their students are autonomous or not. Teachers would then be monitoring aspects in which students are autonomous rather than judging students only based on their observable classroom academic performance.

The implications of this work can extend to researchers interested in the field of learner autonomy. This study brings awareness to the need to be conscious of the students' learning objectives before investigating whether they are autonomous or not or making interventions to promote learner autonomy. However, this research would be particularly useful for learner autonomy research in the department of English, where students are often addressed as mere language learners who need to take control over their classroom learning decisions to be autonomous. In that regard, this research intervenes to demonstrate that students have more than just language learning in their classroom. Therefore, a distinction should be made between language learning modules and academic content modules, as each of these implies different practices of what is considered autonomous learning. On that account, this research also highlights the need to understand that learner autonomy manifests differently according to the contexts in which it occurs. Therefore, each context should be treated on its own merit. Having explained this, I shall move on to illustrate the contribution that this research has made to the domain of learner autonomy research.

#### **6.4. Contribution to knowledge**

The current research is one of the few that aims to develop a contextual understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. Such research helps to bridge the gap between the literature about the concept, perceived understandings, and actual practices relevant to learner autonomy. Therefore, both conceptual and contextual contributions are made. To begin with, the uniqueness of this work resides in the complexity of the study context, which is characterised by the variety of learning goals involved within the classroom and beyond that. Such context helped in identifying several paths for learner autonomy, each of those paths presented a distinguishable interpretation of the discussed concept. The findings of this research supported Littlewood's model of reactive/proactive learner autonomy, but also acknowledged that reactive autonomy is not necessarily a lower form of autonomy in learning. The same findings also allowed me to improve on Littlewood's (1996) model, which addresses autonomy in language learning. The newly suggested model in this work encompasses all directions for autonomous learning that were identified in the current research context (see figure 13). This study also brought attention to Candy's (1988) 'subject-matter autonomy' in which it is suggested that each subject/module should be considered a different case of learner autonomy that needs to be treated within its own limits and affordances. Besides that, one of the major contributions of this research is that it demonstrates that teachers' views of their students' autonomy are limited to the academic domain. However, students' views of their autonomy go beyond that to include their personal lives. This issue was also noted by Ikonen (2013) who said, "whereas teachers tend to view learner autonomy in terms of practical behaviours concerned with classroom learning arrangements, learners attach autonomy with learning in a broader sense and to their own lives in general." (p. 34). This element is of a great importance when investigating learner autonomy where teachers and academics only consider observable learning behaviours. Within the same context, students highlighted a political aspect of learner autonomy and brought attention to the unobservable cognitive autonomous learning efforts that are often overlooked by teachers and academics.

This research also brings to attention the issue of having a disconnection between the actual learning goals in the department of English, which mainly target students' academic content knowledge, and the research about learner autonomy in the same context, which mainly

revolves around English language learning. In such research, students in the department of English are referred to as "EFL students." This research criticises the use of the term "EFL" to describe students whose main learning goals are not only to learn the English language but also to graduate with skills and knowledge in their respective domains. Alternatively, this research presents the different selves of students. First, as EFL learners whose goal is to improve on their language skills, but also as subject-matter learners graduating in their different respective domains. This way, the research highlights both learning domains as perceived by the research participants. In the same vein, the research brings attention to the issue of taking context into account when promoting learner autonomy. Indeed, learner autonomy is crucial, especially at the level of higher education. However, what should be aimed for is constructing well-balanced students who know when to rely on their teachers and when to rely on themselves as the circumstances demand. This way, even when they decide to rely on more expert others, it will be a well-thought-out decision based on their sense of responsibility for their learning.

The theoretical contribution of this research to the realm of learner autonomy is based on the notion of context and how important it is to understand the learning setting before investigating or promoting learner autonomy. In that vein, the research re-establishes the argument by Little (1991), where he stated that "... the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another." (p. 4). This is one major point that this research is advocating. In this respect, it is necessary to clarify that language learner autonomy does not necessarily guarantee autonomy in learning other non-language related subjects. In this regard, Boud (1987) emphasised the highly situation-specific, or content dependent nature of subject matter autonomy. He also noted that understandings of learner autonomy are contextual and relative, and that the ability to function independently in one domain cannot necessarily be transplanted to another subject area. On this account, the different directions for learner autonomy found in this study would make future research and learner autonomy interventions more purposeful, well-articulated, focused, and goal oriented. Other practical contributions of this research are considered in the research implications section. As for the methodological contribution of this paper, it is based on the constructivist approach used in this research. The latter did not essentially aim to find understandings of learner autonomy as in other contexts. However, it prioritised the voices

of students and teachers, in which highly contextualised and pre-existing learner autonomy interpretations were shared. This approach manifested itself in the questions asked in the interviews, which were made to elicit from the participants' understandings and experiences how they relate to learner autonomy. In addition to all this, the research is considered a valuable contribution to the wider educational research on learner autonomy and to the limited work on this concept in the Algerian context. Having said this, the coming section shares some recommendations for promoting learner autonomy as developed in the current research study context.

### **6.5. Recommendations for promoting learner autonomy**

The findings from students' and teachers' data enabled me to give some recommendations about what students, teachers, and stakeholders can do to promote learner autonomy in its different forms as identified in this research. The suggested recommendation echoes students' and teachers' voices about what improves students' autonomy. Those recommendations first supported the research with data about how learner autonomy is understood and interpreted. At the same time, they explained how autonomy is to be promoted in the current research context.

Students' recommendations to improve their autonomy mirrored the different interpretations of the discussed concept. Hence, their recommendations concerned aspects of learning the English language, their academic content learning skills, and learning in general. All student-interviewees agreed that students should take responsibility for developing their own language skills outside the classroom. Students suggested frequent use of English and surrounding themselves with materials and individuals that allow them to practice English. The interviewees argued that having a good level in English is a prerequisite at university for understanding complex information. This was followed by some recommendations about how to become autonomous in learning the academic content they study. In that respect, students proposed doing research, revising lessons, and never only depending on the information that teachers give. Students also added that it is important to listen to teachers, give them full attention when they are delivering lessons, and not hesitate to ask questions and express one's opinions. Students also suggested making the lessons they learn relevant to their personal lives and making sure to benefit from all the learning materials currently available, regardless of their scarcity. Apparently, students' recommendations

about being autonomous learners go along with the responsibilities assigned to them as students. However, instead of being told what to do, students should be proactive and act for themselves. Other than that, some suggested that mentorship programmes should be available for students who can be supervised either by teachers or more senior students. The aim of this programme would be to enable them to quickly let go of those teacher-dependent characteristics from previous education and to introduce them to a more independent kind of learning. This also includes seminars and conferences where students are informed about their learning objectives, and the procedures to attain them within and beyond the classroom.

This research demonstrated the significant role that teachers have as subject specialists who clarify, facilitate information, and guide students throughout their course. In that respect, the following recommendations are inspired by both students' and teachers' answers and by the outcomes of the research. To begin with, teachers need to be autonomous themselves as researchers to be able to understand and recognise autonomous learning and to be able to help students become more autonomous. Moreover, because teachers are role models for students (at least for some of them), they need to be an example of hard work and dedication. In this regard, the students' interviewees insisted that their teachers need to be knowledgeable about the subjects they teach. In fact, some students expressed their frustration when some of their teachers frequently dodged questions addressed to them. Students also suggested that teachers should give more purposeful and interesting assignments that connect to real life and can benefit their professional lives in the future.

Because students and teachers mostly interact inside the classroom, the motivational role of teachers was pointed out several times by all participants. Teachers need to establish good relationships with students and create a safe environment for them to express their opinions freely and respectfully. Such an environment encourages critical thinking and reflection, which are the two things that teachers need to promote in their classrooms. Moreover, teachers need to inform students about their obligations as students and provide them with reading lists and syllabi, so they come to the classroom prepared and with some ideas about the topics to be discussed.

One of the most important recommendations that this research gives to teachers is to be transparent about their teaching objectives with students so they can both be on the same page and collaboratively work on achieving the drawn learning goals. Students need to be

aware of their learning objectives and what to prioritise. Some students in this research mentioned that they are not given the curriculum or even the evaluation criteria for tests and exams. Such a lack of transparency has a negative effect on students' autonomy in the sense that it makes them feel lost within their course without having full awareness of what is expected to be achieved at the end of assignments, exams, or the course as a whole. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to share the curriculum with their students and be clear about the objectives expected to be achieved at the end of each lesson, module, or project. Evidently, students might not have a say in changing the learning objectives, but in a way, they make students feel included in the process of learning, hence they can engage in more purposeful and meaningful learning. Finally, it is the lack of transparency in students' learning objectives that made students and teachers associate the concept of learner autonomy with different learning objectives in this research. While students considered autonomy in their lives, in learning the English language, and in learning the academic content that makes part of their course, teachers only felt concerned with the latter.

Another area that needs improvement is the assessment criteria. Students noted that exams do not seem to encourage critical thinking or reflections on discussed information. This becomes particularly clear when students mention that they are expected to write on exam sheets what they have studied during the lessons. For such reasons, assessment criteria should not be based on memorising what has been studied, but based on the analysis that students give, and their own reflection about the issues tackled.

Recommendations in this research extend to stakeholders and those who make policies at universities and in the higher education sector. First, both students and teachers referred to the need for good university infrastructure. The study participants reported that regardless of the novelty of the university premises, they were experiencing frequent electricity cuts, an absence of light in the early mornings, and a lack of university buses. Such problems may not have a direct influence on students' autonomy in learning, and some students have developed resilience to them, but they surely affect other students' willpower and motivation for learning. Moreover, students and teachers reported a serious lack of technology. The internet, computers for public use, and data projectors are all integral parts of the modern classroom. The absence of these technological materials would contribute to a frustrating learning experience for both students and teachers. Therefore, authorities should do their



best to create a modern learning environment where students and teachers can thrive. Finally, both students and teachers in this research believe that courses in the department of English at the university require at least an intermediate level of English. However, some students come with very weak language skills, which may not be sufficient to understand complex information or write essays. Language in this context is a prerequisite. Therefore, raising students' admission criteria was recommended by all research participants (students and teachers). Besides this, language centres should be provided for students with weak language skills to give extra support to those who need it. The coming section presents the limitations of this study.

### **6.6. Research limitations**

Despite my efforts to present a detailed, rich, and context-specific research, this work bears some conceptual and methodological limitations. These limitations were caused mainly because of the complex nature of the concept of learner autonomy and some contextual factors which will shortly be illustrated.

One of the earliest problems that I faced in this research was the lack of resources about learner autonomy in the Algerian context. Because this research emphasises the importance of context when researching learner autonomy, I was in need of studies about learner autonomy in the context of my research, which were hard to find. Moreover, I faced the problem of translating the concept of 'learner autonomy' to the students' mother tongue. There is no specific word that explains the full meaning of "learner autonomy" in Arabic, and any equivalent to the term "learner autonomy" would consequently lead to a loss of meaning. I addressed this issue by explaining that learner autonomy broadly means "taking charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). This definition is the most cited in the literature, and it was employed to bring ideas of learner autonomy to the participants so they could elaborate on them in their own ways. However, this research endeavour seemed to compromise the conduct of this research by somehow pushing it out of the circle of "inductiveness" and giving it the stance of "conductive research," given that I used a pre-existing definition of learner autonomy in my inquiry. To address this issue, I referred to Thornberg (2012), who highlights the benefits of abductive research. He explained that abduction is not used to mechanically derive a hypothesis from the test, as in deduction, but to use it as a source of inspiration and interpretation to detect patterns. Thornberg (2012)

adds that “by abduction, the researcher goes beyond the data as well as the pre-existing theory or theories” (p. 5). To Thornberg, abductive research is an innovative process that calls for changing insights or generating new ones if necessary. Therefore, the “abductive” approach could be considered a richness to this research rather than an “inductive” approach that fell short.

Another issue that I needed to deal with is that most of the literature about learner autonomy was contextualised in the classroom context and strictly tackled the language learning sphere of learner autonomy. With the lack of theory about learner autonomy in other domains rather than language learning, I needed to be cautious when employing any language learner autonomy ideas or models in a domain of autonomy where language learning is not the main concern. This precaution was necessary, especially since I have made distinctions between the different domains of autonomy in this research.

The methodological limitations mostly occurred because of the outbreak of COVID-19. I successfully managed to reach saturation of data from both universities. However, I had serious problems collecting teachers’ data from the university (B). Although the open-ended questionnaire that was adopted instead of face-to-face interviews was helpful in covering the needed number of participants, the questionnaire was nowhere near in value as the in-depth interviews conducted with teachers in the first case study. Nonetheless, this issue was gracefully managed by maximising the number of open-ended questionnaire respondents. Yet, I believe that having university (B) teachers interviewed would have given more solid findings to the research.

Perhaps, a methodological limitation could be drawn upon the student sample participants of this research. Indeed, Master’s students were purposefully chosen for their advanced experiences under the LMD Algerian higher education system, and this greatly informed the current research with relevant data about learner autonomy. However, this somehow jeopardises the generalizability of the findings of this research to other courses in the department of English at Algerian universities. For instance, unlike students in their licence degree programme, students on a master’s course are, in theory, are more autonomous since they have successfully progressed to the master’s level. In this situation, data from master’s students could potentially reflect more learner autonomy practices and more sophisticated understanding of this concept in comparison to students in their license degree with little or

no experience with higher education teaching methods. In addition to all, students at other levels, i.e., licence degree (bachelor) or even at doctorate level, are at different educational stages. This implied that they aim to achieve different learning objectives that could be language-related, academic content-related, research skills related etc. Evidently, differences in variables could potentially contribute to producing different data than the ones in this research, in which master's students are employed.

### **6.7. Directions for future research**

The current research provided insights about what learner autonomy means to students and teachers in the specific context of the department of English in Algerian universities. However, the findings of this research also rise some questions that open doors for future research directions. For instance, students in this research seem to embrace different identities, as language learners, as students inside the classroom, as researchers outside the classroom, and possibly as autonomous citizens in the community. On that account, this research also showed how learner autonomy can be something very personal. Many students who study in the same learning environments and under the supervision of the same teachers, but they are involved in different autonomous learning activities based on their personal needs and academic motives. Therefore, I here recommend more subsequent studies to this one about learner autonomy in relation to the identities that students embrace in the classroom learning context and beyond.

The research results also presented an illustrative model for learner autonomy in the department of English in Algerian universities (see figure 15). This model presents the different directions in which the participants in this research demonstrated being autonomous. I believe that this model is generalizable to all Algerian students in the department of English at the level of the university, given the homogeneity of the higher education sector in Algeria. However, it would be extremely beneficial to test the validity of this model at other Algerian universities besides the ones where this research was conducted.

The findings of this research also showed that autonomy is not developed in one specific context. However, it is the outcome of a bundle of experiences that individuals go through in different contexts within and beyond the classroom. Therefore, I believe it would be more useful to use a more ecological approach to investigate learner autonomy. an approach that

regards students as a whole body with diverse experiences and shaped by different factors. Such learning approaches have recently started to appear in learner autonomy research, like in Ghout-Khenoune (2019) and Bendebiche (2022). However, these works remain very few in comparison to the positivist views of learner autonomy that regard the concept as one monolithic that others need to subscribe to.

Another possible future direction is the use of different qualitative methodological approaches for researching learner autonomy. Ethnographic research that uses diaries and unstructured interviews is one study approach that allows the researcher to dive deeper into the participants' lived experiences and could help the researchers understand the complexity of how learner autonomy manifests and the supportive conditions for promoting it to the best possible outcomes. Following this line of thought, although I initially used questionnaires in my research, they did not turn to give much complexity and an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation as much as the interviews did. As a result, I would recommend future research lean towards using more qualitative research methods when investigating understandings, perceptions, and attitudes relevant to the notion of learner autonomy.

Finally, this research has flagged that students' learning objectives in the department of English in Algerian universities vary from one level and speciality to another. In that regard, I invite more research that questions the validity of the use of the term "EFL" for students in this context, where "the English language" mostly plays the role of the medium of instruction (EMI) for subject specialist students rather than being the main objective of the taught courses in the context of this research. I believe such research would be particularly useful in revealing the ambiguity about what students' learning objectives are, especially since there are not many studies about this issue.

### **6.8. Concluding remarks**

As an Algerian student taught under an educational system that is often described as based on traditional spoon-feeding pedagogies, I have always thought of myself as an autonomous learner. Indeed, academically speaking, I depended on teachers who created learning paths for me inside the classroom, but I always took it from there to depend on myself to gain knowledge about the topics I studied. Moreover, at a personal level, I have always relied on myself to develop my language skills through the different resources and authentic language material made available to me via technological means. To me, this was an act of autonomy.

However, according to learner autonomy discourse in the department of English in Algeria, students need to take part in the planning of the lesson to be autonomous. Although such views of learner autonomy are inspired by language learning contexts, they are projected onto students in a context where learning the language may not be their main objective.

As a result of such a situation, research about learner autonomy is often blind to the variety of non-language-related objectives that make part of the students' course. Moreover, research about learner autonomy in this context is influenced by nihilistic views about any sort of autonomy that involves depending on teachers for learning. Such views do not take into account the differences in learning goals and their impact on how students best learn. In the midst of such a situation, the current research was conducted to bring new insight about the different manifestations of learner autonomy that reflect learning objectives and contexts where learning occurs. In addition to that, this research brings to attention that learner autonomy does not necessarily need to emerge inside the classroom. However, it can be regarded as a wholesome idea that reflects experiences gained from a variety of learning contexts and goals within and beyond the classroom.

As indicated in the introduction chapter, this research started from an engraved personal interest in all that is related to the concept of learner autonomy. Therefore, I believe that I have revealed some contextual realities about learner autonomy and students' autonomous learning practices. These realities are far from ideal, but they reflect volition, desire for learning, and a sense of responsibility and independence, all of which manifested in a variety of contexts and were conditioned by various factors.

## 6.9. References

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## **Appendix 1: Students' questionnaire**

Dear students,

You are kindly invited to take part in this questionnaire which investigates the notion 'learner autonomy' in Algerian HE context.



**Background section**

1. Please answer the questions and/or shade the item you think appropriate

- 1 Gender:                    o. Male                    o. Female
- 2 Age:                      o. 20 – 25                o. 26 – 30                    o. More than 30
- I live in:                o. The city                o. A province                o. University accommodation
- 3 How would you determine your socio-economic status?  
    o. Low                    o. Lower-middle            o. Upper-middle                o. High

**Part One**

- 1 Why did you choose to study English?  
    . . . . .
- 2 I believe that my level in English is:  
    o. low                    o. Average                o. Good                      o. Excellent
- 3 Do you consider yourself a successful English language learner?  
    o. yes                      o. No                      o. Somehow
- 4 To you, being a successful language learner ***mostly means***  
    o. Getting good grades      o. Communicating in English successfully      o. Both equally
- 5 My ***academic performance*** is mostly influenced by the efforts I make  
    o. Inside the classroom      o. Outside the classroom      o. Both
- 6 My ***communicative skills*** are mostly influenced by the efforts I make  
    o. Inside the classroom      o. Outside the classroom      o. Both  
    Why . . . . .
- 7 Do you think that your language skills will decrease after graduating?  
    o. Yes                      o. No                      o. Somehow  
    Why . . . . .
- 8 Does thinking of your future career affect your performance in English learning?  
    o. Yes                      o. No  
    Why . . . . .
- 9 Are you familiar with the notion “learner autonomy”?  
    o. Yes                      o. No                      o. Somehow
- 10 Can you give the equivalent of `learner autonomy` in Arabic?  
    . . . . .

**Part Two**

2. Please read the statement then tick (x) the appropriate box for you:

		<b>Responsibility</b>
--	--	-----------------------

	<b>I believe that:</b>	Student	Teacher	Both
1	Setting the objective of the course (module)			
2	Selecting the topic of the lesson			
3	Selecting the activities and tasks I do			
4	Choosing the materials, I study with (texts, books, etc..)			
5	Choosing evaluation techniques			

	Statements	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I decide the topic of my project work (exposé)					
2	I make learning/teaching suggestions to my teachers					
3	I see my teachers as guiders and facilitators to my learning					
4	Inside the classroom, I see my teachers as controlling to my learning					
5	I willingly take notes and write all my lessons					
6	I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>classroom</i>					
7	I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>university</i>					
8	I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>society</i>					
9	I attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory					
10	I do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory					
11	I look for the topic of the coming lesson and I prepare myself for it					
12	I reasonably organise my time to learn English					
13	I can transfer and use my language skills in different contexts					
14	I learn English even with the little materials I have					
15	I use different strategies when learning English					
16	I learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc ...					
17	I read books, articles, etc... without being told to					
18	I use my own ways to learn English vocabulary					
19	I make a study plan and stick to it in order to achieve my aim					
20	I use English when watching movies, listening to music or on social media					
21	I enrich my knowledge about lessons which I have not understood					
22	I evaluate my knowledge and communicative skills (i.e. self-reflect and monitor my progress in learning)					
23	I motivate myself when I feel down about my learning					
24	I am aware of my language areas of strengths and weaknesses					
25	I am a self-driven person (I don't wait for people to tell me what to do)					
26	I am persistent (do not easily give up) when facing any difficulty in learning English					
27	I try to be creative in the way I learn and practice English					
28	I challenge myself in learning					
29	I am always ready to increase my knowledge and learn more about different things					
30	I take chances to speak in English and communicate my thoughts					
31	I enjoy learning English					
32	I have a better understanding of how I learn the best					
33	I learn English better independently					
34	I like collaborating with my friends to achieve learning tasks					
35	I share what I have learnt with others					

36	I participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom					
37	I am involved in English language clubs and association					

Please answer the questions and/or shade the item you think appropriate

- 1 When my teacher asks me to do a project work, an assignment, or a presentation I mostly think of it as:
  - o. Homework that I must do
  - o. Opportunity to expand my knowledge
- 2 What learning materials, practices, strategies, or techniques that you think helped you develop your English *inside the classroom*?  
 .....  
 ..
- 3 What learning materials, practices, strategies, or techniques that you think helped you develop your English *outside the classroom*?
- 4 To what extent you think you depend on your teacher *inside the classroom*?
  - o. not dependent
  - o. little dependent
  - o. very dependent
  - o. extremely dependent
- 5 What practices would you suggest to becoming independent and take more learning responsibility *inside/outside the classroom*?  
 .....  
 .....

Thank you for taking the time to respond

If you would like to be interviewed, please leave me your contact details down below

## Appendix 2: Teachers' questionnaire

Dear Teachers,

You are kindly invited to take part in this questionnaire which investigates what the notion of 'learner autonomy' means to you as students in the department of English.

## 1. Background section

- 1 Please answer the questions and/or shade the responses which are most appropriate to you:
- 2 Gender:           o. Male                                   o. Female                   o. Prefer not to say
- 3 Teaching experience:   o. 0 to 5 years                   o. 5 to 10 years                   o. More than 10 years
- 4 Position:           o. Full-time                                   o. Part-time
- 5 Classes I teach:   o. License                   o. Masters                   o. Both
- 6 last time I attended a conference, training or a workshop that aims to improve teaching skills was  
 .....

## 2. Part One

- 1 To you, successful language learning *mostly means*:
- o. Getting good grades
- o. Communicating in English successfully
- o. Communicating in English successfully
- o. Both equally
- o. Others, .....
- 2 Autonomous students, *mostly*:
- o. rely on themselves
- o. rely on the teacher
- o. equally share learning responsibility with the teacher
- 3 Students' **academic performance** is *mostly* influenced by the efforts they make:
- o. inside the classroom           o. outside the classroom           o. both
- 4 Students' **communicative skills** are *mostly* influenced by the efforts they make:
- o. inside the classroom           o. outside the classroom           o. both
- 5 Students who fail in their exams are not autonomous or lack autonomy:
- o. yes           o. No                                   o. Not necessarily
- 6 My students' attitude towards autonomy in English learning is:
- o. Positive           o. Negative                                   o. Indifferent

## 3. Part two

Please read the statements below then tick (x) the appropriate box for you:

Who should assume the following responsibilities ?

	Statements	Responsibility		
		Student	Teacher	Both
1	Setting the <i>objective</i> of the course (module)			
2	Selecting the <i>topic</i> of the lesson			
3	Selecting the <i>activities</i> and <i>tasks</i> they do			
4	Choosing the <i>materials</i> , they study with (texts, books, etc..)			
5	Choosing evaluation techniques			

*Most* if not all autonomous learner:

Statements						

1	Get to decide the topic of their project work (exposé)				
2	Make learning/teaching suggestions to their teachers				
3	Inside the classroom, they see their teachers as guiders and facilitators to learning				
4	Inside the classroom, they see their teachers as controlling to their learning				
5	Take notes and write all the lessons				
6	Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their classroom				
7	Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their university				
8	Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their society				
9	Attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory				
10	Do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory				
11	Look for the topic of the coming lesson and prepare themselves for it				
12	Reasonably organise their time to learn English				
13	Can transfer and use their language skills in different contexts				
14	Learn English even with the little materials they have				
15	Use different strategies when learning English				
16	Learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc ...				
17	Read books, articles, etc... without being told to				
18	Use their own ways to learn English vocabulary				
19	Make a study plan and stick to it in order to achieve their aim				
20	Use English daily when watching movies, listening to music or on social media				
21	Enrich their knowledge about lessons which they have not understood				
22	Evaluate their knowledge and communicative skills (i.e. self-reflect and monitor their progress in learning)				
23	Motivate themselves when they feel down about their learning				
24	aware of their language areas of strengths and weaknesses				
25	Self-driven people (they don't wait for people to tell me what to do)				
26	Persistent (do not easily give up) when facing any difficulty in learning English				
27	Try to be creative in the way they learn and practice English				
28	Challenge themselves in learning				
29	Ready to increase their knowledge and learn more about different things				
30	Take chances to speak in English and communicate their thoughts				
31	Enjoy learning English				
32	Have a better understanding of how they learn the best				
33	Learn English better independently				
34	Like collaborating with their friends to achieve learning tasks				
35	Share what they have learnt with others				
36	Participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom				
37	Involved in English language clubs and association				

3. Please answer the questions and/or shade the item you think appropriate

- 1 To you, in which context learner autonomy is *more* effective in language learning
  - o. *inside* classroom
  - o. *outside* classroom
  - o. both contexts equally
- 2 To what extent you think students in your classes are *autonomous* in their learning?

Masters students:      o. Not              o. Little              o. Somehow              o Very  
Licence students:      o. Not              o. Little              o. Somehow              o. Very

3 In your opinion, what makes an EFL student autonomous *inside the classroom*?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

4 In your opinion, what makes an EFL student autonomous *outside the classroom*?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

5 What do you do to promote for students' learner autonomy *inside/outside the classroom*?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

6 If you have any comments or questions, please let me know in the section below.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Thank you for taking the time to respond

### Appendix 3: Students' interview guideline

#### Part 1: Participant's consent

1. Thank the participant for accepting to take part in interview
2. Explain the aims and objectives of research and re-assure its confidentiality
3. Explain the participants rights

4. Get the participant's consent to start the interview and to record it on tape

### **Part 2: Background of participant**

Can you please tell me about yourself, name, age, and what you do?

### **Part 3: Research topic questions**

1. Are you familiar with the concept of learner autonomy?
2. If you are to explain this concept to someone in Arabic what would you say?
3. As a student majoring in the department of English, what does learner autonomy mean to you?
4. What do you think your learning roles/responsibilities are, inside the classroom and outside the classroom?
5. Do you think that you are an autonomous learner? If yes, what practices you do which make you think like that?
6. What makes you think that you are an autonomous learner inside/outside the classroom.
7. As a student majoring in the department of English, what are your learning roles within/outside the classroom?

#### **Factors:**

What are the factors that affect your autonomous learning behaviour and your understanding of the concept learner autonomy?

As a student, what skills or characters you have in which helped you in your learning?

#### **Personal:**

1. How was your experience and your progress with learning English from the beginning up to now?
2. In a casual day, what learning activities you engage in, inside and outside the classroom?

#### **Institutional:**

1. When you come to university do you feel like there is a culture of learning, do you feel like it is inviting to learn?
2. Do you think that teachers limit and draws boundaries to your learning, or you see them widening and opening your eyes on new knowledge?
3. What do you think of the materials used in your learning at university (texts, laptops, library resources? ...)
4. What do you think about project-based learning (exposé)?
5. Do you participate in classroom discussions? Why do you think that some students may not participate in classroom discussions?
6. Comparing to other educational phases. Do you think that you have developed a responsible and self-reliant attitude towards learning in the years you spent at university?
7. Do you believe that your program of study (LMD) is giving you enough freedom in the way you learn?

8. When you come to university do you feel like there is a culture of learning, do you feel like it is inviting to learn?

**Socio-cultural:**

1. Family/ Friends/ Society, do you see these as supporting to you as a student majoring in English or you see them as obstacles.
2. As a student majoring in English language, do you feel comfortable speaking in this language outside the classroom/university in a public place?

**Socio-economic:**

1. Do you think that the lack of learning resources would stop you from learning the English language?
2. What sorts of learning materials you think would help you become a self-reliant/responsible student?

**Other questions:**

1. What do you think that should be done by your teachers or university for you to become more autonomous as a student?
2. In your opinion what might discourage a student from becoming autonomous and taking responsibility over his/her learning?
3. What advice would you give to a student who wants to be a successful at university?
4. What should be done at the level of university so students can become more autonomous in their learning?

**Finishing the interview**

Would you like to add anything to what you have said?

**Appendix 4: Teachers' interview guideline**

**Part 1: Participant's consent**

1. Thank the participant for accepting to take part in interview
2. Explain the aims and objectives of research and re-assure its confidentiality
3. Explain the participants rights



4. Get the participant's consent to start the interview and to record it on tape

### **Part 2: Participants' Background**

1. Position (fulltime/part-time)
2. Teaching experience
3. What teaching training they had (pre-service-in-service-other)
4. What level do they teach? Or have taught?

### **Part 3: research topic questions**

1. In a few words what comes to your mind when you hear the concept learner autonomy.
2. Do you think you can identify some autonomous learners in your class?
3. If yes, how do you know that they are autonomous? (Traits and practices)
4. What are the characteristics of student who are not autonomous?

### **Teachers' experiences**

1. Back in the days of your university learning, would you consider yourself then as an autonomous learner, to what extent and why?
2. What practices you used to do that can relate to autonomous learning?
3. Professional development
4. Did you have any professional development courses which aim to improve your teaching skills?
5. In those events or courses did you ever talk about the notion Learner autonomy, if yes, how was it captured, described or hinted to?

### **Classroom practices**

1. Do you think that it is essential for students in the classroom to be autonomous? Why?
2. How important are project-based tasks in helping students to be autonomous? Why?
3. Can you recall a case or a situation when one of your students revealed an autonomous learning behaviour learning inside/outside the classroom?
4. How do you feel about your students' autonomy at the level of masters compared to their first year at university?

### **Contextual factors**

1. In your opinion what educational services and facilities that should be provided to support learner autonomy
2. Do you think that the lack of materials (books, technological materials, events, etc...) is a serious hindrance for students to become more responsible and self-dependent in their learning?
3. Comparing to the classical higher education system, do you think LMD structure gave students more freedom in learning at university
4. If yes, do you think this freedom has helped students become more independent in the way they learn?
5. Can you please describe the ideal student/classroom/university for you?

### **Other factors**

1. What role do you think you have in promoting learner autonomy among your students inside/outside the classroom?
2. What difficulties do you face when helping students becoming autonomous in their learning at university?
3. How can your students become autonomous learners in your module in particular?

### **Finishing the interview**

Would you like to add anything to what you have said?

### **Appendix 5: Students' follow-up interview guideline**

1. Are you familiar with the concept learner autonomy? if yes, can you please describe it in Arabic?

2. What does learner autonomy mean to you as a student in the department of English?
3. If I say “Learner autonomy inside the classroom” would that make any sense to you? If yes, can you please illustrate.
4. Do you think that you are an autonomous learner? If yes, what practices you do which make you think like that? I.e., What makes you think that you are an autonomous learner?
5. What skills or characteristics do you have that helped you in your learning as a student?
6. In what ways do you think you are autonomous in your learning context (within/outside the classroom)
7. As a student majoring in the department of English, what are your learning roles within/outside the classroom?
8. Can you please list some factors that affect your autonomous learning behaviour, and your understanding of the concept learner autonomy?

## **Appendix 6: participants' information sheet**

### **Research title**

Understanding and Characterising a Context-Based EFL learner Autonomy in Algerian Higher Education

## **1. Invitation to research**

I would like to invite you to take part in my research as entitled above. My name is Abdelkader CHETOUANE, I am a PhD student at the University of Manchester Metropolitan in the department of Languages, Linguistics and TESOL. My research looks into the notion of “learner autonomy” in Algerian EFL context, particularly in higher education. First it investigates the beliefs and practices that Algerian student in the department of English associate with autonomous learning, Moreover, it attempts investigates the underlying factors behind those beliefs and practices. Finally, it aims to construct a contextual understanding of the notion learner autonomy based on the above-mentioned factors.

## **2. Why have I been invited?**

Your participation would greatly inform my research, first. Because you have successfully completed the first cycle in the Algerian Higher education system (license), which indicates that a certain degree of autonomy should have been achieved. This would raise the chances to get data which are relevant to the study. Second, as this research was decided to take place in the two cities in Algeria, (A) and (B). Your participation as a resident of one of these cities is very appreciated.

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide. We will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which we will give to you. We will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without any justification.

## **4. What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to answer a questionnaire that should take approximately 25 minutes to be read and understood. Beforehand, you will be given this information sheet that you are reading and a consent form to sign for confidentiality purposes. The questionnaires will mainly look into the practices and beliefs that first year EFL master’s students associate with autonomous learning. To meet the criteria of the research and to identify potential interviewees, you will be requested to fill in a section about your contact details, your place of residence. Your parents` job and the ownership of cars, latest technology, etc.

Concerning interviews, they will mainly talk about how can factors (institutional, socio-cultural and socio-economic) influence our understanding of the notion learner autonomy in the domain of English language learning. The interviews will take place 3 months after questionnaires have been distributed on a date and at a time that respects your schedule. Interviews will be held individually and there is no minimum or maximum time to consider is depends on the flow of the conversation, interactivity and the information given. It is worth noting that you will be audio-recorded so later the records will be transcribed, coded and analysed. Finally, if you decide not to participate in the interview you will not need to fill in your personal details handed with the questionnaires.

## **5. Are there any risks if I participate?**

The study will cause no physical or psychological harm to participants. The discomfort or stress participants may experience will be the same experienced as in everyday life.

#### **6. Are there any advantages if I participate?**

There are no direct advantages for participants in this research. However, it is hoped that this research will give an insight about how important it is to contextualise the notion learner autonomy and acknowledge how understandings of this notion can vary from one place to another. The research will help teachers, researchers and curriculum designers to take into consideration understanding of Algerian EFL students of this concept before decisions about promoting for it are made.

#### **8. What will happen with the data I provide?**

When you agree to participate in this research, we will collect from you personally identifiable information. The Manchester Metropolitan University ('the University') is the Data Controller in respect of this research and any personal data that you provide as a research participant.

The University is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and manages personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University's Data Protection Policy.

We collect personal data as part of this research (such as name, telephone numbers or age). As a public authority acting in the public interest, we rely upon the 'public task' lawful basis. When we collect special category data (such as medical information or ethnicity) we rely upon the research and archiving purposes in the public interest lawful basis.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. We will not share your personal data collected in this form with any third parties.

If your data is shared this will be under the terms of a Research Collaboration Agreement which defines use and agrees confidentiality and information security provisions. It is the University's policy to only publish anonymised data unless you have given your explicit written consent to be identified in the research. **The University never sells personal data to third parties.**

We will only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary to achieve the research purpose. Your identity will be anonymised; this is by giving a nickname to your data that you cannot make you identifiable. For further information about use of your personal data and your data protection rights please see the [University's Data Protection Pages](#).

#### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

Results of the research will be published; however, your identity will always be kept anonymous. The results will not carry any traceable details of you. After publication, the research will be available to all participants.

### **Who has reviewed this research project?**

This research is reviewed by: Dr Khawla Badwan and Dr Marijana Macis. It is also reviewed by Research Ethics and Governance Managers.

### **Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

**Abdelkader Chetouane:** [Abdelkader.chetouane@stu.mmu.ac.uk](mailto:Abdelkader.chetouane@stu.mmu.ac.uk)

**Dr Khawla Badwan:** 113 Geoffrey Manton Building, Manchester Campus, UK.  
[Tel:+44\(0\)1612476299](tel:+44(0)1612476299) . Email: [k.badwan@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:k.badwan@mmu.ac.uk)

**Professor Susan Baines:** Faculty Head of Research Ethics and Governance, Email:  
[s.baines@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:s.baines@mmu.ac.uk)

**Katherine Walthall:** Research Group Officer, [Tel:+44\(0\)1612476673](tel:+44(0)1612476673) , Email  
[artsandhumanitiesethics@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:artsandhumanitiesethics@mmu.ac.uk)

### **What should I do now?**

By the time you have finished reading the information sheet and the consent form, the questionnaires will be already given to you. On that account, you can either start answering the questionnaires or you can take all documents with you and decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. (Know that you can still answer the questionnaires without having to be interviewed)

If you have any concerns regarding the personal data collected from you, our Data Protection Officer can be contacted using the [legal@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:legal@mmu.ac.uk) e-mail address, by calling 0161 247 3331 or in writing to: Data Protection Officer, Legal Services, All Saints Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH. You also have a right to lodge a complaint in respect of the processing of your personal data with the Information Commissioner's Office as the supervisory authority. Please see: <https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/>

### **If you have any further questions, then please feel free to contact**

**Email:** [Abdelkader.chetouane@stu.mmu.ac.uk](mailto:Abdelkader.chetouane@stu.mmu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** 077 463 826 88 / +213 (0) 697 483 928

**THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT**

### **Appendix 7: participants' consent form**

Date: 09 June 2019

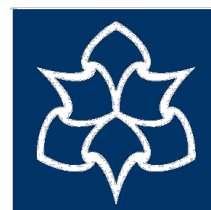
Abdelkader Chetouane

PhD

Department of Languages, Information and Communication

Geoffrey Manton

Manchester Metropolitan University



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**



**Appendix 9: written consent for the conduct of research at university (A)**



Request letter to collect data from the department of English at [redacted] university

Dear [redacted]

My name is Abdelkader CHETOUANE, a current PhD student at the university of Manchester Metropolitan, Uk. And a former student at the university [redacted] where from I obtained my Licence degree in 2014.

This letter is to confirm that you [redacted] as a gate keeper are fully aware of the research I am intending to conduct at the department of English in [redacted]. My study aims to increase understanding about the notion EFL learner autonomy in Algerian context. As part of my research plan I will be giving surveys to teachers and first year master's students. The surveys will be followed by interviews in which participants will be invited to take part in voluntarily.

Having all this said, I hereby want to take your consent to start collecting the necessary data for my research. If you agree on my request this, please feel free to give your signature at the bottom of this letter.

Sincerely,

Abdelkader

[redacted signature] 

Head of the departments' consent.

Appendix 10: written consent for the conduct of research at university (B)

Request letter to collect data from the department of English at [redacted] university

Dear [redacted]

My name is Abdelkader CHETOUANE, a current PhD student at the university of Manchester Metropolitan, Uk. And a former student at the university of [redacted] where from I obtained my Master's degree and a fully funded scholarship in 2017 to pursue my studies abroad.

This letter is to confirm that you [redacted] as a gate keeper are fully aware of the research I am intending to conduct at the department of English in [redacted] university. My study aims to increase understanding about the notion EFL learner autonomy in Algerian context. As part of my research plan I will be giving surveys to teachers and first year master's students. The surveys will be followed by interviews in which participants will be invited to take part in voluntarily.

Having all this said, I hereby want to take your consent to start collecting the necessary data for my research. If you agree on my request this, please feel free to give your signature at the bottom of this letter.

Sincerely,

Abdelkader

Head of the departments' consent.



## **Appendix 11: Interview Sample with student interviewee 8 from case 2**

**Date:** April 2020

**Researcher:** Can you please tell me about yourself?

**Student Interviewee 8:** My name is [REDACTED]. I am 25, I study English, I am also an English language teacher, and my specialty (in Masters degree) is Didactics and that is it I guess.

**Researcher:** Are you familiar with the concept of learner autonomy?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Yes.

**Researcher:** Can you give the translation of the concept of learner autonomy in Arabic?

**Student Interviewee 8:** استقلالية المتعلم

**Researcher:** What does this concept mean to you as a student majoring in the department of English?

**Student Interviewee 8:** For me, Learner autonomy I guess, it is being independent and doing research on my own while the teacher is just a guider and just a facilitator, so I am the one in charge, I am doing the conclusions and somehow being oriented but also somehow, I am also responsible on my own decisions and the way my learning goes as far as how my skills go and etc.

**Researcher:** If I say autonomy inside the classroom, would that make any sense to you?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Yes, I would say for me it is like the learner is in the center of the learning process so even if the teacher gives an information, learner autonomy would be like how the learner would perceive this piece of information, like he would have an opinion about it, a point of view towards it. Even if the teacher does not ask for your opinion, you will have your own independent opinion separate for the teacher, like the teacher said that piece of information and in your head as a learner you have this all brainstorming going, and this whole bubble of thoughts and ideas towards that information that is completely independent from the teacher and the class. That is for me autonomy even not shared with the teacher or even if the whole thing is not completely correct it would still be considered autonomy, even if you are making mistakes inside of your head but you are evolving thoughts and I would consider that autonomy.

**Researcher:** As a student, what do you think your learning roles are, inside the classroom and outside the classroom?

**Student Interviewee 8:** well inside the classroom basically, I take notes, skimming and scanning g documents we are given to us, this can be done inside and outside the classroom, as well as following the teacher, understanding, participating in the debates, and extensions of thoughts and discussions, teamwork you know pairing and sharing with other students. Giving observations. And yeah, mostly inside the classroom, presentations when we are asked to. Besides having the exams and tests and all that.

For the outside the classroom, I would say mostly research and taking points further than what was given by teachers and not to settle to whatever the teacher gives.

**Researcher:** These information are mostly related to what you study in the academic content in the different modules, but as an EFL student you also study the English language right?

**Student Interviewee 8:** In that particular aspect, as language student it is more oriented to, for example at the master's level, we have training (teaching) we need to be in the field, closer to the environment of didactics. As for the language skills, we are not natives, so we have to always develop our skills. Also, having conversations in English, learning vocabulary from listening to music and watching movies in English, but these are more of behind the scenes activities which I also consider autonomous. Also going to conversation clubs. In fact, I have been doing this for so long that I have forgot to mention them first, they became part of my routine. Having casual conversations in English on messenger you would be helping yourself and your language skills.

**Researcher:** How was your experience and your progress with learning English from the beginning up to now?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Well, learning English for me was kind of a natural process, I first was introduced to English when I was in primary school, it was through some movies on MBC 2 and some channels. I really liked the language, and I picked an interest almost instantly in the language. So, I was trying to have this competition with my friends by listening to the words and see in the translation in Arabic in the subtitles then ask each other what that particular word meant after a few minutes. So, it was a very enjoyable process for me.

**Researcher:** In a casual day what are the things that you do in relation to English language inside and outside the classroom?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Well, few years ago I was listening to music in English like all the time. I watch movies, and I read newspapers in English too, articles, blogs and YouTube videos every day. But for now I don't do that anymore because it is just too much for me now. I already think in English so, when I speak to myself, I speak to myself in English, I do listen to music though when I drive so I don't hear the sound of the engine it scares me. My phone settings are in English, all my devices are put in English language, what else. I do still watch movies video. And obviously I use English in my job when I am teaching.

**Researcher:** Do you think that you are an autonomous learner?

**Student Interviewee 8:** To some extent yes, because I do learn English by myself, all by myself, and even at the academic level I do research all by myself as well. I am never dependent on the teacher, whether it is in English Math or any other subject. I mean I did rely on the teacher to some extent, but I always had that space to do things on my own.

**Researcher:** What are the factors that affect your autonomous learning behavior and your understanding of the concept learner autonomy?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I think the environment helps, for me I had a friend who helped me learn the language, we would talk and practice and talk in English almost everywhere, at school and outside it doesn't matter so my friend that as a social factor helped tremendously. If I was all by myself, I would not have been able to do that. So, she was some sort of an encouragement. At the same time, I had some bad English teachers which shook the love that I had for English language, those teachers, were not encouraging in they were not welcoming, they did not receive us as students well, but this was at middle school. Also, what boosted my autonomy is the culture (the American culture) which I immersed myself in it through materials like movies and songs, I had access to the internet, so all that really helped my autonomy.

**Researcher:** What skills or characters you have in which helped you in your learning as a student?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I think what make me an autonomous learner is that fact that I am very competitive, when I see someone challenging me, I don't know. I like challenges. so, I like to put bets then I tell myself see I did it. So, I like challenges and I am very competitive.

**Researcher:** When you come to university do you feel like there is a culture of learning, do you feel like it is inviting to learn?

**Student Interviewee 8:** No. actually this is how I started to put more efforts by myself, because school was never learner-friendly to me. So, for me it is like if I don't get what I need from here, then I have to get it from somewhere else you see. I gotta to work for myself and go on my own to get what I want.

**Researcher:** Do you think that teachers limit and draws boundaries to your learning, or you see them widening and opening your eyes on new knowledge?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Well, when you said the first part of the question I thought of a certain type of teachers, then when you said the second part I thought of a different kind of teacher. So here I think it depends on the teacher I had some experiences with teachers who are very narrow, and it is like they are trapped in a box. At the same time, I also met teachers when you have a conversation with them you just get mind blown you know, they just fill you with sparkles and knowledge and they give you this thirst of wanting to know more and experience more of that knowledge.

**Researcher:** What do you think of the materials used in your learning at university (texts, laptops, library resources? ...)

**Student Interviewee 8:** so, we did have a data show but one PC for the teacher, but it was not for students to use. We have a library, but it was not everybody had access to it, books there were treated like treasures.

**Researcher:** What do you think about project-based learning (exposé)?

**Student Interviewee 8:** for me personally I love projects, and I loved the fact that we had to present them, I liked the fact of working by myself on a project and even when I work in groups when we divide chores. But I love projects I think they help public speaking in presentations when it comes to the language. It happens with the confidence, and it help on all skills, mostly speaking and the writing because you will need to write it. And these are the

most difficult and challenging ones to do, and even when speaking it is not easy because you will be defending your thought and you will be evaluated. And in terms of research when the teacher gives you a topic then you go and collect data and information and it helps your skills and your autonomy as well.

**Researcher:** Why do you think that some students may not participate in classroom discussions? Are you one of them?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I learnt not to judge, in the beginning I thought those students who don't speak maybe they are weak, or they don't have anything to say. But through the years, I figured that because students are not saying anything, it doesn't mean that they don't have anything to say. Because most of the smart people, they don't talk much so they don't participate. Till they are asked, and they leave everybody in shock with their answers which can be deal breakers. And I try to do it myself actually. I try to focus more and analyse before jumping in and sharing my thoughts. Also, not all those participate mean that they are participating. Because there are those who participate for the sake of participation or just talking just filling the air with words but that is not what participating is about, it is about contributing with actual information and knowledge to enrich a discussion with opinions and part of views. For me, I go back and forth between the two. I am salient an analysing when I need to be like that, and I also share information when there is something that needs to be said so it also depends on the topic being discussed.

**Researcher:** Comparing to other educational phases. Do you think that you have developed a responsible and self-reliant attitude towards learning in the years you spent at university?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Yes, I would say I became more autonomous. The teacher does his work by preparing the lesson and search for the literature and all, but it is up to you to understand and read more and know more about what is being taught. Especially in language learning, I mean teachers at university are not teaching you the language especially in master's level. in license we had like oral expression, written expression and grammar but after that in third year it was over. We had more modules that do not necessarily tackle in English. So, at university English is essential but it is tackled in the beginning, as you move to masters it is no longer language learning, but you are specialised in particular domains. Also, language learning at university is different it is not learning the basics, but you learn new academic vocabulary and expressions in the classroom and when you do research.

**Researcher:** Do you go to the library?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Sometimes yes, I meet with my friends there when we have groups projects.

**Researcher:** How do you feel about the library, and does it live up to your expectations?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Library is a place for me and my classmates to meet and work on projects and if I we are lucky, we find the books that help us in our project there. As for the resources, I think we can all agree that libraries in most Algerian universities are not that advanced and well equipped.

**Researcher:** Do you believe that your programme of study (LMD) is giving you enough freedom in the way you learn?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I feel like there is a conflict between what the LMD is saying and what some teachers are doing. But, in my case I attend all of my lectures and tutorials, so for me it is not really about having choice in the system of education.

**Researcher:** Family/ Friends/ Society, do you see these as supporting to you as an EFL student majoring in English or you see them as obstacles.?

**Student Interviewee 8:** family and friends, yeas for sure they are very supportive. My friends were down with anything I suggested to help us to learn the English. For example, my friend and I would agree to watch this series called Hannah Montana that was my favour show.

**Researcher:** I grew up watching that show too, it is by Miley Cyrus. Along with other shows like Zak and Cody and the other show the main character was Raven.

**Student Interviewee 8:** ah yes, the show is called it's so Raven, it was broadcasted on MBC3. But my favourite was Hannah Montana. So, my friend would watch it from her home, and I would watch it from my home, and we would have a recap and pick up all the jokes that they said. So having her practice with me really helped me learn the language.

**Researcher:** How about society?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Society on the other hand considering English is a foreign language, I don't blame them. It is only recently that became popular but, in my days, growing up it was more French. So English was something new, nobody spoke in English, everybody starred at me when I spoke in English in the street with someone. Everybody looked at us in a weird way



and I spoke English with my friends. But nowadays. People are more open to English. So, society is changing.

**Researcher:** As a student majoring in English language, do you feel comfortable speaking in this language outside the classroom/university in a public place?

**Student Interviewee 8:** Well, it is mostly with my friends. we do speak English outside, but there isn't much opportunities to speak English casually outside like when you ask for directions for example, it is not like French. But yea I do speak English outside with my friends.

**Researcher:** Do you think that the lack of resources would stop you from learning English?

**Student Interviewee 8:** No, at least not at the moment. I speak English already.

**Researcher:** What sorts of learning materials you think would help you become an autonomous student?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I think chatting would be beneficial for me, having more contact with natives that is all I have, I think being introduced and having contact with the culture itself would sparkle back that light, because comparing to high school that excitement to learn English that flame it kinds turned down. and that thirst I had for learning the language you know had fallen back. Because when I was active and do volunteering, I used to meet many natives. I would speak to them and have conversations. but now I feel distant from it. And this goes hand in hand because at university when I work on my language skills it helps my studies and the other way round.

**Researcher:** What do you think that should be done by your teachers or university for you to become more autonomous?

**Student Interviewee 8:** The good teachers who helped us and encouraged us to be autonomous are those who shared with us their ideas and points of views that gave us a rope to have our own critical thinking and points of views. For instance we have this teachers who taught us legislation and it was something related to politics, so it was very general topic, and you know those kind of controversial topics when you are show your opinions and your points of view, but still leave us room to develop our own opinions and views so we had the chance to agree, disagree and of course justify our answers so that helped us develop our own autonomy, personality and identity as students. So, you have to give room for innovation like

a discussion within the lecture where everyone gets to participate instead of having a dictator where everybody is listening, and he is speaking. this teacher that I told you about he would even sit with us in a circle.

**Researcher:** In your opinion what might discourage a student from becoming autonomous and taking responsibility over his/her learning?

Student Interviewee 8: I think it is the teachers' attitude for sure because ultimately the attitude that teachers give make you like the language and what you study or hate it.

**Researcher:** What advice would you give to a student who wants to be a successful EFL Student at university?

**Student Interviewee 8:** I think because now they are language students, they need to live the language. Like they need to surround themselves with it. They need to practice it, because a language that is not spoken it is forgotten. you are a language student you put your phone in that language, you put your pc in that language, make your hobbies in that language. The article and the emails you write also should be in that language, so try to surround yourself with English and that would help you to learn it. Once you get better at it, you will be moving to other challenges which is your speciality like doing research and focus on study skills. Because at the level of masters you are not here to learn basic conversational skills, you need to focus on your specialty because in this context the language is a pre-requisite and a priority. Also, English is a means of communication, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you are a good EFL student. So, language facilitates communication for students to make something with the language they are studying and at the same time they are enriching their language with new vocabulary and expressions and improving their style.

**Researcher:** What should be done at the level of university so EFL students can become more autonomous in their learning?

**Student Interviewee 8:** to help students with the language, universities should provide exchange programmes for students to go to English speaking countries and spent some time there, well it wouldn't only help these students with the language but also in becoming autonomous in life.



## **Appendix 12: Interview Sample with teacher interviewee 6 from case 1**

**Date:** May 2020

**Researcher:** can you please tell me little bit about yourself?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** I am a lecturer in [REDACTED] since 2013 and before this I worked as a high school teacher for 10 years. so, I feel I have some experience in the field of teaching of students in different levels, beginners, intermediates, and even advanced learners. I live in [REDACTED] where I teach, and I am doing research about the need for teaching authentic ESP for Algerian medical students.

**Researcher:** That's amazing, and it sounds interesting, so what levels do you teach, or have you taught at university?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** I teacher both licence and masters.

**Researcher:** In few words, what comes to your mind when hear the concept learner autonomy. The first impression, what comes to your mind?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** so, I think when talking about the autonomy of learners, there is a responsibility for learners to control their own learning, an ability or power to act independently in controlling the learning style in terms of material selection, selecting activities, in terms of self-motivation. So, the teachers are not involving in the learning as an authority, but the teacher is more of a guide. In simple words, Learner autonomy is that kind of learning which takes place outside the educational institution without the full intervention of the teacher. And here I do not mean the absence of the teacher, the teacher is always there offering help when students need help in achieving learning goals. Also, autonomy comes in degrees, there are situations where the teachers is totally absent. But the kind of autonomy that I am talking about is when students need some kind of guidance where the learner feels free to take decisions about their own learning.

**Researcher:** to you, what is an independent learner?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well, the term independence is not that far from the notion learner autonomy, independence entails to be responsible, to feel that the learner is free to take decisions about his learning in terms of the different aspects like selecting the materials, selecting the objectives that suits the learners needs. And even self-evaluation. Independent learning means to me what we call self-directed learning where the teacher is no longer the

dominator, the teacher is no more than a guide a facilitator, no more than a consultant, that is what I mean by an independent learner.

**Researcher:** Now, to you what is a responsible learner?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** autonomy, responsibility and independent these concepts are all in the same ground and we define one concept by using the other.

**Researcher:** To you, do you think that you can identify some autonomous students in your class?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Right, yeah. Well autonomous students are bright students who do not wait for the teacher to give them everything, and the role of the teacher here is to teacher them how to get information by themselves from the internet, from books. so, it is important for teachers to show their students how to achieve successful learning.

**Researcher:** What are the traits of those you think are autonomous learners?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** I think it is easy for a teacher to make the difference between autonomous students and who are not, autonomous learners are bright, those who don't wait for the teacher to give them everything, those who take initiative, those who do more than the others, they are committed in a sense they do things without being asked to. They are also those who feel more responsible towards their learning, and most of the time they are self-reliant in doing activities and doing extra-activities to show that they are better than the others, so they are hard workers.

**Researcher:** So, back in the days at your university learning. Would you consider yourself back then as an autonomous learner?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Yes, to some extent. I was one of the hard workers. I used to ask my teachers a lot of questions. I used to do some works at home then show them to the teachers, written works especially. And when the teachers are absent, I used to write or do something related to English (stay connected with the language and his studies) this is to show my teachers that I am the best of the best. So yeah, as I said before it has something to do with hard work, autonomous learner is a hard worker, and most of the time tends to be creative in his works.

**Researcher:** Did you have any professional development courses, and by professional development I am talking about those, seminars, workshops and conferences that aim to improve your teaching skills.?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Yeah, we had a study day in 2018 and one of the colleagues he talked about the notion learner autonomy. But it was about inside the classroom how to promote for learner autonomy inside the classroom. But I believe learner autonomy happens mostly outside the classroom and I believe this is needed more than ever, especially through E-learning and the use of technology in learning. So, students who are autonomous do not have a problem with it, they are autonomous, they have the skills to help them learn in distance from the teachers.

**Researcher:** Well, teaching and learning at university sometimes is in the form of making projects, doing assignments and presenting them, do you think that project-based tasks, (les expose) are really helping students become more autonomous in their studies.?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** yeah, I think they are important to realise a kind of autonomy but certainly with the guide of the teachers. They are an opportunity for learners to practice their freedom and research skills. These projects also grant freedom for students to collect whatever information they need, or they see suitable to be later on discussed with their classmates and the teacher. Still teacher's role should always be present. To guide and to offer help. But this also depends on the level of students not only their autonomy, if a student is confident enough to choose his own topic, I would not stop him or her, I would not intervene. But sometimes student is not competent enough to choose their own topic and, in this case, I have a list of titles which they can choose from and do research about. So, they have the option, if they want to choose a topic of their own, they are welcome to do it and if they do not know what to do research about or their level does not permit them to select a topic by themselves, I assist by giving suggestions on them.

**Researcher:** Can you recall a case or a situation when one of your students revealed an autonomous behaviour inside or outside the classroom?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Yeah, I remember one time I was teaching Oral expression, and some students presented a play in a very beautiful and un-expected way, their performance was spectacular, and I was really astonished and pleased with their work. I believe this was an act

of autonomy, I didn't suggest on them what to do or what to say so the entire work was theirs and they made it in a beautiful way.

**Researcher:** How do you feel about your students' autonomy in masters comparing to their first year at university.

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Certainly, there is a difference. But unfortunately, not for all students. It depends on the student himself, there are some students who still the teacher to present, to tell them what to do, to correct them, to do most of the job in the classroom. and they don't do research. and this is the majority of students. But there is a minority of students who show you that they are responsible learners, and they want to show their teachers that they are capable, and they are the best in the classroom. they bring something special to the classroom.

I believe it is a question of motivation too. Motivation has to be present in this. we should talk about self-motivation and students can do this by doing activities they enjoy like watching documentaries listening to music all this would help them learn in a more entertaining way. as for students who are not autonomous, they are those who are not motivated first, and they have problems with the difference technicalities with the language like writing and speaking. I also believe that intermediate language users can achieve some noticeable degree of autonomy, they already have the language skills, and they would just employ them in being autonomous in their studies, I mean the process of mastering a language itself requires some sort of autonomy, hard work and motivation. so good language users are autonomous, and their language skills is a sign of their autonomy. And those who don't have a good command of language they would be struggling with the language itself which would present them from doing research and becoming autonomous in learning the content not the language.

**Researcher:** In your opinion, what educational services and facilities that should be provided to support learner autonomy?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well first, the teacher should motivate the learner, and that is his role, besides teaching them about how to learn, the strategies and he use of different method to employ in their learning. and instructing the about the tools they should use to stay connect to their studies. Besides this we need technology, technology is very important in learning nowadays, it opens new doors and unleashes leaners abilities.

**Researcher:** Do you think that the lack of materials is a serious hindrance for students' autonomy?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well, our teachers and us as teachers did not have many technological devices to use in learning but we were autonomous to some extent I mean with the affordances of the materials we had in that time. So, autonomy is something that is much bigger than the materials it a psychological state that comes from within and it grows and developed with technology however lack of technology or materials would not stop a learner from becoming autonomous.

**Researcher:** comparing to the classical system, do you think that LMD gave more freedom to students in learning at this level (university)?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well, it does give freedom, but I don't see it working on all of our students. In our university or maybe all Algerian universities there is a problem of practices, students don't do their roles as students and even some teachers tend to rely on the syllabus rather than involving students in making decisions about what to study or teach.

**Researcher:** Can you describe the ideal student for you?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** The ideal student is autonomous, he makes most of the work outside the classroom he is bright, clever, the one who asks a lot of questions, the one who thinks before he or she answers, the one who has got a good command of language the one who masters the language. he is confident in his skills. Because if you don't know how to express yourself how are you going to conduct research and impress me. The ideal students would write with few grammar mistakes

**Researcher:** What about the ideal classroom and university for you?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well, a classroom full of bright students, technological tools like data show. a classroom where materials and tools are available in our university sometimes you can't find pens or you can't make photocopies and sometimes we don't have electricity, but this is the reality, we have many problems. How can we talk about promoting for successful learning while we don't have the basics to teach and learn? And these are serious challenges and sometimes frustrating too.

As for the perfect university, what we need is organization and communication, sometimes you feel like everything is chaotic. Also, there is a lack of vision, what we want to achieve and



where we are going to take our learners with the information and with the teaching we provide, all this is not clear. So, the best thing our university would need is organisation and a clear vision of what is needed to be worked on collaboratively. All this besides some technological problems that we should solve like the internet and technological materials and tools too.

**Researcher:** How can you describe students who are not autonomous?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** they are lazy, they don't ask questions or bother to know. Don't take part in discussion in the classroom. sometimes or often rely on their colleagues when there is a group work, most of the time. they don't read. They want the teacher to dictate especially in exams they wait for direct question not analytical questions which requires thinking and analysis.

**Researcher:** What role do you have to promote for learner autonomy in you EFL classroom?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** the role of the teacher is to motivate, guide, show students how to learn outside the classroom. like in online teaching or learning and have them use different technological tools like zoom or skype. Etc. also, to be present whenever students need help

**Researcher:** What difficulties do you face when helping students becoming more autonomous?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** The main problem I face with my students is lack of motivation and lack of language proficiency, English is the medium of learning at university, but it is very frustrating to see students who do not understand what you say although they are majoring in English. Lack of language proficiency has got a negative psychological impact on students too, student who do not have a good command of language how are they going to explain themselves to teachers and to their peers, how are they going to contribute to classroom discussion, so this would create for them a hindrance and would have a direct impact on their autonomy when it comes to learning the content or doing research about their subject matters.

**Researcher:** How can your students become more autonomous in your module in particular?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Well, I am currently teaching ESP, if I am teaching ESP to students who wants to learn English for medicine or technology, those students are probably, old, mature, and they have chosen to study English by their will, so I would not face many

problems with them. However, when you are teaching ESP module to students majoring in English, the situation is different. Students lack motivation, they lack good language skills, they are not committed so all these need to be worked on and I wish to see my students doing more research by their own, make use of the things they learn in the classroom by putting them into action.

**Researcher:** Would you like to add anything to what have been already said?

**Teacher interviewee 6:** I think it is very important to talk about Learner autonomy, it is a topic that needs to be tackled in our context in Algeria. And when talking about learner autonomy one should not neglect teacher autonomy because if the teacher himself is not autonomous how can students become autonomous, so freedom should come from both teachers and students. Although there is some flexibility for teachers but on many occasions, the syllabus comes from the ministry, and we have to apply it. For instance, the materials to use, and the topics to address and even the order of topic, so the teachers are not totally free to make changes.

**Researcher:** Thank you so much for accepting my invitation and for taking part in my interview.

**Teacher interviewee 6:** Your welcome, I wish you all success in your work.

## Appendix 13: Students' quantitative data report

### 1. Background section

Gender		<b>Case (1)</b>	<b>Case (2)</b>
	Male	33%	74%
	Female	67%	26%
age	20 - 25	93%	87%
	26 - 30	02%	09%
	More than 30	04%	04%
Place of living	The city	74%	72%
	A province	21%	09%
	University Accommodation	05%	19%
Socio-economic status	Low	03%	10%
	Lower middle	51%	35%
	Upper middle	46%	54%
	High	01%	02%

### 2. Part One:

#### Level of English

	<b>Case (1)</b>	<b>Case (2)</b>
Low	00%	04%
Average	33%	25%
Good	58%	45%
Excellent	09%	26%

#### To you, being a successful language learner mostly means

	<b>Case (1)</b>	<b>Case (2)</b>
Getting good grades	00%	09%
Communicating in English successfully	36%	35%
Both equally	62%	54%
Other	02%	02%

#### My academic performance is mostly influenced by the efforts I make:

	<b>Case (1)</b>	<b>Case (2)</b>
Inside the classroom	13%	19%
Outside the classroom	22%	25%
Both equally	64%	57%

My communicative skills are mostly influenced by the efforts I make:

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Inside the classroom	14%	06%
Outside the classroom	39%	62%
Both equally	48%	32%

Do you consider yourself a successful English language learner?

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Yes	58%	64%
No	07%	0%
Somehow	36%	36%

Do you think that your language skills will decrease after graduating?

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Yes	20%	29%
No	80%	71%

Does thinking of your future career affect your performance in English learning?

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Yes	70%	69%
No	30%	31%

Are you familiar with the notion 'learner autonomy'?

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Yes	56%	32%
No	16%	32%
Somehow	28%	36%

### 3. Part two:

I think of assignments, or presentations as:

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Homework that I must do	47%	42%
An opportunity to expand my knowledge	42%	53%
Both	11%	05%

To what extent you think you depend on your teacher *inside the classroom*?

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Not dependent	02%	00%
Little dependent	53%	48%
Very dependent	31%	44%
Extremely dependent	13%	07%

Students' perspectives on who assumes the following responsibilities inside the classroom:

Statements	Case (1)			Case (2)		
	Teachers	Students	Both	Teachers	Students	Both
1 Setting the objectives of course (module)	58%	14%	28%	73%	00%	27%
2 Selecting the topic of the lesson	77%	05%	18%	78%	04%	18%
3 Selecting the activities and tasks I do	47%	07%	47%	40%	24%	36%
4 Choosing my studying materials	30%	33%	37%	22%	29%	49%
5 Choosing evaluation techniques	65%	09%	26%	61%	08%	31%

Students' autonomy-related learning activities:

Statements	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Means	SD	Means	SD
1 I decide the topic of my project work (exposé)	3.93	0.88	3.87	0.91
2 I make learning/teaching suggestions to my teachers	2.73	1.00	2.55	1.08
3 I see my teachers as guiders and facilitators to my learning	4.13	0.91	3.44	1.03
4 Inside the classroom, I see my teachers as controlling to my learning	3.15	1.18	3.23	1.00
5 I willingly take notes and write all my lessons	4.44	0.88	3.98	0.99
6 I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>classroom</i>	3.46	1.25	3.32	1.15
7 I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>university</i>	2.63	1.25	2.87	1.55
8 I involve myself in opportunities that aim to improve my <i>society</i>	3.57	1.03	3.40	0.88
9 I attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory	4.11	1.15	3.70	1.18
10 I do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory	3.23	1.14	3.27	1.07
11 I look for the topic of the coming lesson and I prepare myself for it	3.00	1.10	3.04	1.44
12 I reasonably organise my time to learn English	3.51	1.14	3.52	0.29
13 I can transfer and use my language skills in different contexts	3.93	0.87	4.04	0.88
14 I learn English even with the little materials I have	4.53	0.66	4.27	0.86
15 I use different strategies when learning English	4.26	0.88	4.38	0.71
16 I learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc ...	4.55	0.89	4.71	0.60
17 I read books, articles, etc... without being told to	3.75	1.39	4.15	0.81
18 I use my own ways to learn English vocabulary	4.37	0.91	4.50	1.67
19 I make a study plan and stick to it in order to achieve my aim	3.51	1.19	3.49	1.26
20 I use English when watching movies, listening to music or on social media	4.33	0.87	4.58	0.72
21 I enrich my knowledge about lessons which I have not understood	3.90	0.91	4.02	1.13
22 I evaluate my knowledge and communicative skills (i.e. self-reflect and monitor my progress in learning)	3.88	1.04	3.83	0.97
23 I motivate myself when I feel down about my learning	4.37	0.77	3.91	1.02
24 I am aware of my language areas of strengths and weaknesses	4.48	0.62	4.29	0.72
25 I am a self-driven person (I don't wait for people to tell me what to do)	4.53	0.69	4.25	0.87
26 I am persistent (do not easily give up) when facing any difficulty in learning English	4.24	0.74	3.94	0.97
27 I try to be creative in the way I learn and practice English	4.13	0.86	3.96	1.12
28 I challenge myself in learning	4.31	0.79	4.38	0.83
29 I am always ready to increase my knowledge and learn more about different things	4.13	1.09	4.20	0.98

<b>30</b>	I take chances to speak in English and communicate my thoughts	4.71	0.72	4.49	0.79
<b>31</b>	I enjoy learning English	4.28	0.86	4.06	0.89
<b>32</b>	I have a better understanding of how I learn the best	4.2	0.89	4.12	0.78
<b>33</b>	I learn English better independently	4.17	0.96	4.46	0.75
<b>34</b>	I like collaborating with my friends to achieve learning tasks	3.48	1.2	3.47	1.06
<b>35</b>	I share what I have learnt with others	2.02	1.26	2.11	1.32
<b>36</b>	I participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom	3.72	1.22	3.83	1.09
<b>37</b>	I am involved in English language clubs and association	1.97	1.28	2.77	1.42

## Appendix 14: Teachers' quantitative data report

### 1. Background section

		Case (1)	Case (2)
Gender	Male	43%	36%
	Female	57%	64%
Teaching experience	0 - 05	57%	18%
	05 - 10	00%	18%
	More than 10	43%	64%
Position	Full-time	57%	90%
	Part-time	43%	10%
Teaching classes	License	43%	27%
	Masters	00%	27%
	Both	57%	46%

### 1. Part one:

Successful language learning mostly means

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Getting good grades	00%	00%
Communicating in English successfully	43%	27%
Both equally	57%	73%
Other	02%	00%

Autonomous students, mostly

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Rely on themselves	43%	27%
Rely on the teacher	00%	00%
Equally share learning responsibility with the teacher	57%	73%

Students' academic performance is mostly influenced by the efforts they make

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Inside the classroom	14%	00%
Outside the classroom	14%	18%
Both equally	71%	82%

Students' communication skills are mostly influenced by the efforts they make

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Inside the classroom	07%	10%
Outside the classroom	29%	36%
Both equally	64%	58%

Students who fail in their exams are not autonomous or lack autonomy

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Yes	29%	10%
No	00%	00%
Not necessarily	71%	90%

My students' attitude towards autonomy in English learning is

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Positive	29%	36%
Negative	07%	27%
Indifferent	64%	37%

Teachers' perspectives on who should assume the following responsibilities inside the classroom:

Statements	Case (1)			Case (2)		
	Teachers	Students	Both	Teachers	Students	Both
1 Setting the objectives of course (module)	86%	00%	14%	80%	10%	10%
2 Selecting the topic of the lesson	43%	00%	57%	64%	18%	18%
3 Selecting the activities and tasks	64%	07%	29%	55%	18%	27%
4 Choosing the studying materials	50%	07%	43%	54%	10%	36%
5 Choosing evaluation techniques	64%	00%	36%	80%	10%	10%

In what context learner autonomy is more effective:

	Case (1)	Case (2)
Inside classroom	00%	27%
Outside the classroom	14%	09%
Both contexts equally	86%	64%

The extent to which I think students are autonomous learners in my classes

	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	License students	Masters' students	Masters' students	License students
Not	23%	00%	00%	00%
Little	31%	60%	30%	64%
Somehow	46%	40%	70%	36%
Very	00%	00%	00%	00%



Most if not all autonomous learners:

Statements	Case (1)		Case (2)	
	Mean s	SD	Mean s	SD
1 Decide the topic of their project work (exposé)	2.21	1.76	2.72	1.42
2 Make learning/teaching suggestions to their teachers	2.42	1.65	3.00	1.25
3 See their teachers as guides and facilitators to their learning	3.14	1.79	3.45	0.93
4 Inside the classroom, they see their teachers as controlling to their learning	2.21	0.69	2.81	1.25
5 Willingly take notes and write all their lessons	3.85	0.77	3.90	0.83
6 Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their <i>classroom</i>	4.07	0.82	3.54	1.21
7 Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their <i>university</i>	4.07	0.82	3.54	1.21
8 Involve themselves in opportunities that aim to improve their <i>society</i>	4.07	0.82	3.54	1.44
9 Attend lectures (les cours) although they are not compulsory	4.14	0.66	4.09	0.83
10 Do assignments and tasks which are not compulsory	3.64	0.63	3.72	1.19
11 Look for the topic of the coming lesson and prepare themselves for it	4.14	0.66	3.81	0.98
12 Reasonably organise their time to learn English	3.85	0.86	3.09	0.83
13 Can transfer and use their language skills in different contexts	4.07	0.61	4.45	0.69
14 Learn English even with the little materials they have	4.14	0.77	4.36	1.21
15 Use different strategies when learning English	4.21	0.57	4.54	0.52
16 Learn from anything that is in English, music, a video-clip, etc ...	4.55	0.89	4.63	0.50
17 Read books, articles, etc... without being told to	4.5	0.51	4.45	0.52
18 Use their own ways to learn English vocabulary	4.21	0.69	4.45	0.93
19 Make a study plan and stick to it in order to achieve their aim	4.28	0.61	3.81	1.25
20 Use English when watching movies, listening to music or on social media	4	0.67	4.54	0.52
21 Enrich their knowledge about lessons which they have not understood	4	0.67	4.18	0.87
22 Evaluate their knowledge and communicative skills (i.e. self-reflect and monitor their progress in learning)	4.14	0.66	4.18	0.87
23 Motivate themselves when they feel down about their learning	4.50	0.55	4.27	0.65
24 They are aware of their language areas of strengths and weaknesses	4.14	0.53	4.27	0.65
25 They are self-driven people (they don't wait for people to tell me what to do)	4.10	0.53	3.90	1.22
26 They are persistent (do not easily give up) when facing any difficulty in learning English	4.50	0.55	4.36	0.50
27 Try to be creative in the way they learn and practice English	4.28	0.61	4.54	0.52
28 Challenge themselves in learning	4.07	0.47	4.27	0.79
29 They are always ready to increase their knowledge and learn more about different things	4.21	0.57	4.45	0.69
30 Take chances to speak in English and communicate their thoughts	4.28	0.72	4.45	0.69
31 Enjoy learning English	4.35	0.63	4.36	0.81
32 Have a better understanding of how they learn the best	4.14	0.66	4.27	0.65
33 Learn English better independently	4.14	0.36	3.90	1.04
34 Like collaborating with their friends to achieve learning tasks	4.28	0.82	3.54	1.04
35 Share what they have learnt with others	4.28	0.61	4.18	0.75
36 Participate in learning discussions inside/outside the classroom	4.35	0.63	3.72	0.79
37 Involved in English language clubs and association	3.15	1.28	4.18	0.75