



Exploring Learners' Experience And Perceptions Of Online And Autonomous Learning: A Case Study Of Algerian Master 1 Students In Abou Al KACEM Saadallah University

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Abstract:

This paper investigates learners' perceptions of their online learning experience and teachers' views regarding their online teaching experience with the aim of exploring the potential influence of online learning on the construction of learner autonomy. Our interest is triggered by the new demands imposed on university students witnessing, within the digital age, a shift of the learning mode from the traditional on-site context to the hybrid mode implying online learning. To this end, a case study involving both qualitative and quantitative methods is carried out to provide an accurate picture of 100 Algerian University students' and Master 1 teachers' perceptions. The findings suggest, according to the students, that online learning helped promoting students' "reactive autonomy", to some extent, though teachers' views run counter such a result. On the other hand, students tend to hold more negative than positive views vis-à-vis online learning – a finding shared by the teachers taking part in this study. Some pedagogical proposals are made, in this regard, stressing both 'reflective' and 'reciprocal' dimensions of learning, and suggesting that autonomy is determined by a number of factors including intensive training in metacognitive strategies, internet literacy, ICT skills, motivation, teacher's guidance and student-student interaction.

Keywords: Online Learning; Autonomy; EFL students.

Introduction

The traditional on-site learning that prevailed for decades in the Algerian universities witnessed a shift towards blended learning including on¹line learning. The decision was made by Higher Education Ministry, as was the case of the educational system across the globe, for the sake of maintaining instructional continuity due to the sudden spread of Corona Virus.

The attempt to cater for the new demands put on our educational system at the tertiary level was supported by the rapid explosion of ICT (information and communication technologies) witnessed by humanity. Nevertheless, students who engage in learning through electronically delivered means like

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specific platforms, video conferencing, educational websites, emails, blogs...are supposed to promote such skills as digital literacy, critical thinking, communication, flexibility and leadership.

Indeed, as the forms of education are constantly altering, both instructors' and students' role are expected to be changing in parallel. In a distance-learning situation, the teacher is no more regarded as an instructor who is "the ultimate owner of knowledge"; rather, this old-fashioned function assigned to the teacher turned to be a facilitator, counsellor and resource. As regards learners' role, students who used to be described as "passive recipient of knowledge" within the approach of teacher-centeredness are supposed to adopt a more active role by taking responsibility of their own learning process. Time management, goal setting, monitoring progress and self-assessment are among the prerequisite skills needed to cope with the new pattern of learning. To achieve this endeavour, students are required to be independent, self-sufficient and autonomous. However, are our students prepared to approach their academic learning in an autonomous way? What is the relationship between learning autonomy and online learning? To what extent have teachers contributed in promoting their students' autonomy to cope with online lessons? Consequently, this paper seeks to investigate students' readiness and perceptions of the impact of online learning on stimulating learning autonomy.

Accordingly, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does Online Learning help promoting learner autonomy?

RQ2: How far do teachers prepare students for online learning?

RQ3: What are EFL students' perceptions of their online learning experience?

This line of research is particularly promising because the findings of this inquiry will offer enhanced insights about the ways in which the notion of autonomy may be strengthened in a virtual setting. Exploring EFL students' attitudes vis-a-vis online learning and taking a closer look on the profile of the autonomous learner in virtual settings may guide the educationalists and university teachers in launching innovative instructional techniques aspiring at empowering students to be autonomous, independent and life-long learners who are able to take control of any new situation. Thus, enhancing learning independence and shaping students' potentiality to carry on learning outside classroom settings in a successful way are crucial endeavours to be reached.

The study consists of two main parts: a theoretical part and a practical one. The first part provides a critical analysis of the concept of autonomy and sheds light on the notion of online learning. It also reviews relevant and updated research investigating how online education fosters learning autonomy.

The second part deals with the research methodology used for the present study and offers a rationale for data collection procedure, the participants, research tools and data analysis procedure. It also covers the presentation of the findings together with the discussion of the results, the conclusions reached and pedagogical proposals.

1.Theoretical Foundation

1.1 Learning Autonomy

A review of the previously existing literature suggests the emergence of diverse definitions depicting the nature of learning autonomy as complex and multi-dimensional. Indeed, Little (2003:1) has remarked that there were controversies about:

...whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behaviour; whether it is characterised by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy.

But before highlighting its various aspects, it is worth mentioning that the roots of the modern idea of learning autonomy goes back to the philosophy of Rousseau that reinforced “learner’s responsibility for learning” as an innate route leading to autonomy (Bensen, 2001:24). Indeed, considering the notion of autonomy as the ability to take responsibility of one’s own learning is an idea shared by other researchers like Holec (1981) who was the first to start a discussion about autonomy in language teaching and learning. Autonomy in this sense is regarded in terms of a set of behaviours such as setting educational objectives, taking initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, monitoring the learning process and evaluating one’s achievement (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Autonomy, considered from another viewpoint, is related to the awareness about and use of the strategies and techniques making learning a language without a teacher a possible endeavour (Oxford, 1990). However, the question that imposes itself is: Does the construct of learner autonomy imply the total absence of the teacher? In this regard, Holec (2009. Cited in Palfreyman, 2020) highlights that there are two paradigms related to autonomy in language learning. The first one is called “self-directed learning” when the learner is the only one who is in charge of decision-making. The second one is called “co-directed learning” which aims at promoting learners’ participation in the decisions and objectives made by the teachers in a gradual fashion. Hence, autonomy, according to Holec (1981), does not necessarily imply ‘self-directed learning’, though the latter presupposes the notion of learner autonomy.

In a similar vein, Littlewood (1999:75. Cited in Benson, 2008:23) has made a corresponding distinction between “proactive” autonomy based on the level of self-regulation which “regulates the direction of activity as well as the activity itself”, that is to use Benson’s (2001) words, both methods and content of learning are controlled by the learner himself, and “reactive autonomy” in which the activity is regulated “once the direction has been set”. For Benson (2001), the second type of autonomy implies that only the methods are controlled by the learner, and though many researchers acknowledge solely the first type, namely “proactive” autonomy, Littlewood considers reactive autonomy as beneficial and “...useful in educational contexts” (p: 24).

Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect learners to develop “proactive” autonomy in an atmosphere characterised by “teacher-centeredness” where the teacher is the holder of absolute authority and knowledge. This is common with the Algerian educational system that regards the teacher as “...the one who is all-knowing, wise and unchallengeable.” (Milianni, 2012:221) According to Fedj and Benaissi (2018), the large power distance between Algerian teachers and learners implies minimal opportunities to develop the habit of questioning; hence:

...students’ intellectual disagreement and detection of what is right or wrong is sometimes seen as challenge and effrontery. This has in some way resulted in a tendency towards a conservative approach to learning, where many learners lack a level of rational scepticism and critical thinking, which are key components of learner autonomy. (pp: 454-455)

In this regard, Benson (2001) discusses “the cultural appropriateness of the idea of autonomy in language learning” (P: 55) by suggesting that the concept of autonomy takes different shapes in different cultural contexts. It is argued that the students belonging to some non-European countries like the Asian countries, characterized by a collectivist tradition, may find difficulties in reaching the concept of autonomous learning as clearly highlighted by Ho and Crookall (1995:237. Cited in Benson, 2001:55):

Being autonomous often requires that students work independently of the teacher and this may entail shared decision making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher. It is, thus, easy to see why Chinese students would not find autonomy very comfortable.

In a similar vein, Sonaiya (2002. Cited in Fedj and Benaissi, 2018: 454), maintains that the Algerian context resembles the Chinese one, as it is characterised by “collaboration, authority’s control, indirectness and social status that are deeply rooted in the national cultural background,” which, according to her, runs counter the concept of autonomy. For a comprehensive discussion of the cultural influences on student responses to autonomy, see Benson (2001). Miliani (2012) further explains that the Algerian teachers, who were not trained systematically in western pedagogy, encountered difficulties in applying a new educational model which is different from their own perception of pedagogy. When developing learner’s autonomy, the connection between teacher training and learner training becomes a key necessity in formal instruction as underscored by Hadi (2018) who examined learners’ readiness and teachers’ roles in promoting autonomy in first year Algerian pupils in secondary education. Hadi calls for the necessity of receiving professional training to develop teachers’ careers as educators, as he remarked, “teachers in secondary schools find it difficult to promote their learners’ autonomy because they were not informed how to do so in their pre-service training.” (P: 131)

Preparing learners for autonomy and independence in language learning involves diverse ways including authentic materials using the internet (Ibid). Indeed, Motteram (1997. Cited in Benson, 2001) stresses the connectedness between new learning technologies and learner autonomy. The potential relationship will be discussed in the following section.

1.2. Autonomy and Online Learning

Before considering the technology-based approaches to the development of autonomy, it is worth, at the outset, defining the concept of online learning.

The sophistication of technology development encouraged the shift towards “online learning” or some other concepts with a similar meaning like “distanced learning” and “virtual learning” (Muliya et al, 2020). Such patterns of learning share similarities as Moore et al (2011) conclude that “the commonalities found in all the definitions is that some form of instruction occurs between two parties (a learner and instructor); it is held at different times and/or places, and uses varying forms of instructional materials.” (P. 130) This “form of instruction” offers teaching content delivered in an online environment, thanks to educational technology, through the usage of internet and computers (Benson, 2001). The fact that the learner and teacher do not need to share the same time and place implies physical distance or separation that is likely to make this type of learning flexible (Gottardi, 2015). Indeed, Carliner (2004: 3) confirms, “computers offer so much flexibility and variety, making online learning versatile and flexible.” But this separation between the teacher and the learners does not mean that there is no interaction between the two parties. On the contrary, “it is the potential of technology to facilitate interactions that would be difficult or impossible in the classroom...” (Benson, 2001: 136-137) The interactive opportunities between the learners and the teachers may cover a wide range of situations and can be synchronous or asynchronous (Abed, 2018). Conrad (2005. Cited in Fotiadou et al, 2017) focuses on the teacher’s role in fostering interaction among students in order to build and maintain community in the context of distance education, and the interaction with the teacher and the learning material can be achieved by adopting dialogue (Anderson, 2007. Cited in Fotiadou et al, 2017). In a similar vein, the potential that the internet may offer for language learning is its role in establishing links between classmates likely to foster the creation of “a collaborative learning model.” (Harasim, 2012. Muhammad, 2020) Indeed, Benson (2001) supports this idea as he highlights, “internet technologies open up opportunities for interaction among learners, between learners and target language

users, and between learners and teachers...The Internet also appears to facilitate learner control over interaction.” (P: 139)

The extent to which technology-based approaches may enhance autonomy is related to many conditions. According to Benson (2001), the idea that the use of the Internet fosters learner autonomy remains an “assumption”, as it is dependent on the various types of interaction occurring around the learners and the manners in which the Internet is accessible by the learners (Warschauer, et. al. , 2000. Cited in Macia et. al., 2023). Similarly, Little (1997. Cited in Macia et. al., 2023) considers the awareness of one’s own role as a learner and the equipment with the necessary tools to benefit from the resources offered by the Internet as two conditions to be fulfilled to enhance autonomy. This can be achieved, according to Kenning, (1996. Cited in Macia et al, 2023) through opting for learner training in the use of the Internet to make informed choices, and according to Fotiadou et al (2017), through the equipment with the necessary studying strategies and routines that lead to the mastery of the learning process and the identification of the learning steps.

In a similar vein, Gottardi (2015: 112) maintains that the type of learning fostered by Distance-learning is based on “strategies that encourage participation, interaction, research, debate, dialogue and, especially, collaboration, cooperation and sharing thoughts, ideas and solution for cooperative learning.” The strategies highlighted by Gottardi reinforce the social dimensions of learning as they are related to the capacity to “learn from others” by developing skills to achieve communication with others (Tremblay, 2003. Cited in Eneau and Devellotte, 2012). Such a dimension is referred to by Eneau and Devellotte (2012: 9) as the “collaborative or reciprocal dimension to learning, which allows learners to learn from and with other learners by creating groups that are themselves autonomous and have their own identity.” Nevertheless, this dimension based on social strategies is not the only facet of a distance learning aiming at developing the autonomy of the learners, as the “reflective dimension” based on metacognitive strategies encouraging “learning about oneself” like the ability to identify “how one learns, noting one’s strengths and weaknesses, etc” (Eneau and Devellotte. 2012: 8) is a crucial dimension enabling learners to approach any learning situation with full understanding and to benefit from all the opportunities offered for the sake of learning (Ibid).

In this regard, the teacher’s role is primordial in attempting to encourage independent learning, as he should be perceived as a “pedagogical mediator” who is likely to create “collaborative environments learning” (Gottardi, 2015:112). Indeed, in a distance learning situation, the teacher is supposed to adopt the role of a facilitator and counselor by being the source of motivation and support for the learners (Little, 1995; Moore, 1997. Both cited in Fotiadou et. al., 2017) and by raising learners’ awareness about the benefits of independence in learning (Marcia et. al., 2023). Moreover, the teacher is not only a guide, but also a resource who helps students by offering information about the learning routes and a variety of activities as a basis for students’ selection (Ibid). Indeed, according to Santos and Camara (2010. Cited in Fotiadou et al , 2017) within online learning the teacher is the one who is responsible for determining the parameters that guarantee development in student’s learning. This reinforces Little’s (1990. Cited in Benson, 2001) assumption that autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher. Other researchers even consider that distance learning is unlikely to help learners in acquiring the autonomous skills unless the teachers’ function is well-defined, as Rowntree (1990:11. Cited in Benson, 2001:133) well explains:

The materials must carry out all the functions a teacher or trainer would carry out in the conventional situation – guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternatives answers, appraising each learner’s progress, giving appropriate remedial or enrichment help...and so on.

Hence, teachers are supposed to perform the above-mentioned roles to prepare learners for autonomy using technology-based approaches, that is to set up the conditions compatible with autonomy.

The upcoming section is devoted to reviewing research relevant to the relationship between autonomy and online learning.

1.3. Insights from Research

A strand of research attempted to explore the effectiveness of online education in promoting autonomous language learning (Hidayati and Husna, 2020; Cervera et al, 2005; Zhong, 2018; Erarslan and Arslan, 2019; Firat, 2016; Gottardi, 2015; Eneau and Develotte, 2012; Nielson, 2012; Fotiadou et. al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020; Muliyah et. al. 2020; Macia et. al., 2023).

In their majority, these pieces of research were case studies qualitative research aiming at exploring learners' attitudes and perceptions about autonomy in online environments, and the data collection tools utilized were mainly questionnaires, interviews, and self-analysis reports. Among these reviewed studies, there is one empirical study conducted by Fotiadou et. al. (2017) and which is based on a correlation analysis of a questionnaire completed by 100 postgraduate students at the Hellenic Open University in Greece. Such a study stresses the importance of the collaborative or reciprocal dimension to learning as their main findings suggest a positive correlation between learner autonomy and both student-student and tutor-student interaction.

Similarly, one of the major findings of a qualitative study carried out by Macia et. al. (2023) is the ability of students in using "socio-affective strategies" that are characteristic of autonomous learning. Such a finding is also congruent with the results suggested by a study carried out by Gottardi (2015) aiming at analyzing aspects of 12 student's autonomy development in a distance education context related to the development of professional skills in an Educational Institution. Indeed, the findings demonstrate that distance education improves the autonomy of the language learners as it enhances not only students' collaboration and interaction with colleagues and course tutors, but also students' commitment with responsibility, initiative, time management, search for solutions and engagement in activities. In a similar vein, another study by Eneau and Develotte (2012), aiming at exploring the impact of reflective and collaborative dimensions on the construction of autonomy for 27 online learners enrolled in Master's Programme for Teaching French as a Foreign Language, reinforces the importance of interpersonal relationships in social and emotional terms as a tool to face any challenges related to distance learning. As a matter of fact, according to this study, reaching the level of autonomy in online learning does not imply simply "learning by oneself" without being aware of the role of others in the process of learning and constructing autonomy.

Accordingly, both reflective and collaborative dimensions of learning are underscored to achieve autonomous learning. A finding reached by Zhong's (2018) study that ascertains that thanks to online learning, the participant becomes not only a critical user of multiple resources, but also a collaborative online learner; more to the point, he is transformed into both a manager and an organizer. The findings of another study conducted by Soler et. al. (2005) sustain these outcomes as the seventy-nine students from different Catalan universities reveal positive perceptions regarding online learning as they are able to identify their areas of deficiencies as well as to set up learning objectives – a proof of their independent decision-making skills. This research stands on the idea that learners need to acquire new roles, which are a demand of an online-mediated learning environment. In a similar vein, according to Hidayati and Husna (2020), who carried out a piece of research to investigate 71 senior high school

learners' experience for online autonomous learning, and despite the difficulties uncovered, learners react positively to online education, and they adjust themselves to suit this new environment.

Erarslan and Arslan (2019), in their research study investigating 41 ELT students' opinions about online learning and its effect on their study practices, demonstrate that students held both positive and negative opinions regarding online learning. Nevertheless, the researchers highlighted that the participants mentioned that they attempted to compensate for the negative aspects of online learning, like "lack of immediate feedback" by relying on cooperation and developing collaborative learning routines and practices such as, "the initiation of WhatsApp groups for interaction." (Ibid: 2019: 54)

Erarslan and Arslan (2019) used the concept of "e-autonomous" learning practices and study skills (like setting the personal online learning goals, self-awareness, making extensive researches...) to refer to the positive effects of online learning on participants' practices.

Some findings suggest that the autonomy of distance education students is dependent on ICT literacy. Indeed, Firat (2016) conducted a research study to analyse and evaluate the autonomy of 3293 distance education students in e-learning settings from Anadolu University (Turkey), using an e-learning autonomy scale. Some of the items on the scale are "planning learning experiences, evaluating learning performance, [and] determining learning goals" (P: 194). One of the major results of this study is that autonomy of learners is not significantly affected by the program itself; rather, it is strongly influenced by ICT use encompassing the computer and internet literacy.

Similarly, in a study aiming at bridging the gap between high school and university, Nielson (2012) mentioned that the acquisition of computer skills is prerequisite to cope in e-learning environments. He attempted to answer the following question: "Did e-learning based on online tests, portfolio, self-assessment and individual learning plans promote more independent learner behavior?" The previously mentioned tools are involved in the teaching of Arabic as a second language at university level with the aim of promoting learner autonomy as they represent scaffolding activities likely to allow students to gradually reach independence and to prepare them to cope with the demands of the professional life that requires flexibility and adaptability. Another major finding of this study suggests that the use of learning plans, which is directly related to "taking responsibility for the learning process", was done mainly by those students who are already doing well in their studies, while weak students did not use this tool. This led to a huge gap between weak and strong students and hence the question of how to help weak students acquire responsibility for their learning should be addressed. Also, Nielson (2012) stresses the importance of motivation in facilitating the achievement of autonomy as he maintains, "...motivation is a core factor if an increased degree of learner autonomy is to be achieved." (P103) In a similar vein, Macia et. al. (2023) support this view as they consider motivation as the "fuel" of the learning process.

Another case study by Muhammad (2020), aiming at promoting 25 students' autonomy through online learning media in EFL class, aligns with the previously mentioned findings as it indicates that collaborative learning and the opportunity for students to comment on each other's opinions in a virtual classroom are reinforced. Indeed, the respondents had a great degree of engagement, either with peers or with the material provided, such as videos and e-books owing to the platform flexibility and integration of social interaction. More to the point, this study reports a unique psychological benefit of online learning as it allowed shy students to voice their thoughts in the comments section – an outcome that bolstered their confidence.

On the other hand, online learning has not proven to be effective in other situations. For instance, Muliya et al (2020) conducted a case study in Indonesia to investigate students' perceptions and

preparedness to learn English online via a WhatsApp group. According to the data, 66.9% of participants chose to study in a classroom setting, while just 18.5% favoured online learning, and 14.6% enjoyed both choices. In a nutshell, it is highlighted that to reach independent learning, students still require direct guidance, as mentioned by Muliya et. al. (2020: 390): “In online language learning, students need to have the willingness (motivation and confidence) and ability (skills and knowledge) to achieve learning objectives together (Reinders, 2010).” Indeed, teachers are supposed to play a pivotal role to motivate and encourage their students in their online classrooms. The researchers also stress the need of a gradual shift from the traditional approaches to student-centered approaches.

At length, it is worth highlighting that the findings of the previously reported studies suggest, in their majority, a positive influence of online learning on learner’s autonomy as a number of aspects are reinforced such as the integration of social interaction, students’ commitment with responsibility, initiative, time management, search for solutions and engagement in activities. Nevertheless, it is stressed that reaching the desired level of autonomy is dependent on a number of factors like motivation, acquisition of internet literacy, teacher’s guidance and student-student interaction. As a matter of fact, these findings are illuminative as the previous studies are mainly small-scale studies, and this will not allow us to make generalisations. Much research adopting different research methods is, hence, required to carry out large-scale studies with the development of a standard e-learning autonomy scale. In addition, the previous studies focused solely on the learners’ perceptions without taking into consideration the views and the opinions of the other key player in the learning process, namely the teacher.

In the present study, I will attempt to explore the views and opinions of both students and teachers regarding the experience of online learning so that to depict a more comprehensive picture. The next part is devoted to the research design, the data collection procedure, the research tools and the participants.

2. Empirical Study

2.1 Research Methodology

The purpose of this part is to describe the methodology utilised to explore students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the potential influence of online learning on students’ autonomy. To this end, a case study involving qualitative and quantitative methods is adopted as it seems to be an appropriate descriptive and explanatory way to collect information. This method is selected as its main advantage is its naturalistic nature, without the intervention of an experiment or manipulation of variables (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989).

2.2. Participants and Context

The subjects taking part in this study are 100 students enrolled in Master 1 degree in Applied Linguistics and TEFL in the department of English of Algiers II University. In addition, the study meant to engage all the teachers of Master 1 in data collection.

The student participants, whose age ranges from 20 to 24, were volunteers who attended five years of compulsory English before entering university and three years of Licence, in which they attended such modules as study skills, critical reading of literary texts, research methods, advanced writing and linguistics. During the outbreak of COVID-19, the decision was made to adopt a hybrid method of teaching, so Algerian EFL university students were mainly engaged in an online learning platform (Moodle). In addition, they were involved in face-to-face sessions that were scheduled before the

examinations for the sake of revising the content delivered on the platform. The amount of the on-site teaching hours for each course did not exceed three hours per one semester; and hence, this implies that this hybrid learning involves more online learning than on-site learning. Data collection took place in the academic year of 2022/2023.

2.3.Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The research tools used to collect data are a questionnaire and an interview.

The questionnaire is devoted to both students and teachers to answer the first and second research questions, and it is opted for as a research tool as it is a well-known instrument used to collect structured and quantified data. (Wilson and Mclean, 1994) It includes mainly closed-ended questions (yes/no questions and tick the appropriate answer from a series of options.)

The questionnaire is divided into two main sections. Section 1 contains two questions on general information about the students, namely their age and gender. Section 2 consists of six questions. The purpose of question 1 is to know the type of the e-learning tools used in online learning. Question 2 is meant to figure out the strategies that students usually use to cope with online teaching materials, and question 3 pertains to inquiring about whether students have been prepared for online learning. Questions 4 and 5 have the purpose of grasping an understanding of students' perceptions of their teachers' role in online and on-site learning. Question 6 seeks to explore the potential effect of Online Learning on learner autonomy.

The participants belong to two groups of master one that I was teaching the module of Learning English as an Additional Language, and they are the ones who accepted to be part of my study after asking for their availability to fill out the questionnaire. This operation took place on-site (during my class) as the participants were allotted 20 minutes to answer the questions. The participants' responses are analysed using descriptive statistics and percentages. According to Cohen et al (2007), closed-ended items of the quantitative questionnaire are practical for creating frequencies, and they are more direct and more focused than open-ended questions.

The questionnaire devoted to the teachers comprises the same questions of the students' questionnaire and interview, as the aim is to consider any (mis)match between students' perceptions and teachers' perceptions regarding online learning and learner autonomy. Nevertheless, the first section elicits information about the teachers' qualifications, gender and teaching experience. The questionnaire was sent online to all the teachers of master one (six teachers). The latter were asked to send their answers once they finish the task of completing the questionnaire. Nevertheless, only four teachers reacted to the questionnaire.

The interview is devoted to fourteen students who are selected randomly from the sample of 100 students, after asking for their permission to respond to the questions of the interview. The aim of the latter is to answer the third research question. Interviewing is a common way of collecting qualitative data (Merriam, 1998). I designed a semi-structured interview which lasted about 20 minutes. The purpose of question 1 is to examine whether students perceive the experience of Online learning as different from the traditional face-to-face classes. Question 2 is concerned with mentioning the possible difficulties/challenges encountered by students while attempting to deal with the online lessons. Question 3 and 4 aim at highlighting how students understand the meaning of "An autonomous learner" and whether they are aware of the importance of "Learner autonomy" as a crucial factor in academic achievement in an online learning context.

2.4.Data Analysis and Presentation of the Results

The purpose of data analysis procedure is to describe, illustrate and evaluate the findings through the interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data.

2.4.1. Students' Questionnaire Results

Quantitative data is yielded through the questionnaire devoted to students and teachers. The questionnaire was given to 100 Master 1 students, but only 92 students could answer all the questions. Hence, eight students' questionnaires were not taken into consideration. Among the 92 students, there are 71 female (77.17%) and 21 male (22.83%). All the participants agreed that the only e-learning tool used in online learning is Moodle Platform in which teachers uploaded their teaching materials. This way of teaching favours asynchronous interaction.

When asked about the strategies used to cope with online teaching materials, the results suggest that the participants tend to use a variety of strategies, that are mainly used in reading comprehension, as the teaching materials are mainly written texts. These strategies are presented in the following table according to the order of use by the participants.

Table1: Strategies Used by the Students

Strategies	Number	Percentage
1Summarising	69	23.24%
2Doing research about key concepts	67	22.56%
3Analysis	39	13.14%
4Skimming and scanning	38	12.79%
5Guessing meaning from context	34	11.45%
6Synthesis (establishing a connexion between the topics)	18	6.06%
7Overlook unfamiliar words	17	5.72%
8Use predictions	6	2.02%
9Evaluation	5	1.68%
10Inferences	4	1.34%
Total	297	100%

It is to be noted that the participants are asked to add any other strategies not proposed by the researcher, and their answers (three answers) are classified into two categories:

- Socio-affective strategy: “group discussion with classmates.” “ask other students for help when needed”

- Use of Video-based learning: “I look for videos or podcasts, since I hate boring, long written lessons.”

Regarding the question of students’ preparedness for online learning, the majority of the participants (78.27 %) mentioned that they have been prepared for this type of learning, while 21.73% reported the opposite. The first category of participants specified the modules that prepared them for tackling online lessons. Study skills was in the first position (51.03%). Critical writing was in the second position (26.53%). Reading and writing was in the third position (20.40%). Literature was in the last position (2.04%). When asked to explain how these modules helped them in online learning, the following patterns emerged.

- Study skills as a source of “learning strategies” (problem solving, adaptability, doing research, time management, stress management): “The use of different learning skills such as learning strategies, styles and both problem solving and critical thinking.” “It provides learners with the appropriate skills that nowadays are used to handle any problem.” “It taught students to adapt to any situation.”
- Critical Writing as a source of critical thinking skills like analysis and elaboration: “The questions in the exams are usually indirect, so I use critical writing and thinking to be able to answer.” “It enabled me to get used to ask questions, I analyse texts.”
- Reading and writing leading to effective reading and writing summaries and synthesis: “both receptive and productive skills helped me in summarising the online lessons.” “Reading and writing prepared me to read effectively and how to summarise and write my own synthesis.”

Regarding teachers contribution in the learning process, the participants consider that the teachers are required to perform a variety of roles. Within the context of online learning, the participants expect the teacher to be first as a guide (26.38%), second as a motivator (16.66%), third as an information provider (13.88%), fourth as an adviser (13.54%), fifth as an organiser (13.19%), sixth as a supporter (10.41%) and seventh as a negotiator (5.90%).

Within the context of onsite learning, the participants expect the teacher to be first as a guide (21.06 %), second as an information provider (15.35%), third as an adviser (14.52%), fourth as a motivator (13.27%), fifth as a supporter (12.44%), sixth as an organiser (10.37%) and seventh as a negotiator (9.95 %).

Teachers’ roles classified in the first and last positions are similar in both types of learning (onsite and online), i.e. the teacher as a guide in the first position, and the teacher as a negotiator in the last position. Nevertheless, while in online learning, the participants favour the teacher adopting the role of a motivator then the role of an information provider; in onsite learning, the participants favour the teacher as an information provider, then an adviser and motivator (since they received close percentages.)

As far as the potential Online learning influence on learners’ autonomy is concerned, 51.08% answered that online learning developed their autonomy. As a response to the sub-question seeking to explore the ways in which Online Learning has impacted the participants’ autonomy, the following characteristics are mentioned (table 2) in the order of importance as suggested by the participants’ answers.

Table 2: Autonomous Learning Characteristics

Skills	Number	Percentage
Awareness of how to use language materials effectively	28	23.33%
Self-Evaluation	28	23.33%
Self-Management	26	21.66%
An ability to define one's own objectives	20	16.67%
Careful organisation of time for learning	18	15%
Total	120	100%

The above-mentioned skills are the characteristics of autonomous learning based on Hedge's (2000) conception of the features of a learner who can take responsibility for learning. Awareness of how to use language materials effectively and self-evaluation fall in the same first position. Not far from them, we find self-management. Then, "the ability to define one's own objectives" comes in the fourth position. In the last position, we find the feature of the "Careful organisation of time for learning." It is to be noted that one participant added another impact by stating, "I trained myself to study alone" supporting thus the idea of learning independence.

2.4.2. Teachers' Questionnaire Results

The four teachers who answered the questionnaire items are all female. Their teaching experience ranged from 10 to more than 30 years. All the participant teachers are doctors in Linguistics and didactics, except one who is professor.

All the teachers think that the experience of online teaching is different from the traditional face-to-face classes. When asked to justify their answers, the following categories emerged.

- **No synchronous interaction:** "There are no opportunities for teacher-student and student-student interaction to discuss ideas and urge students to express their points of view. I firmly believe that classroom interaction and discussion are important to develop students' critical thinking and go through a process of conceptual change."
- **Time constraints:** "Less time to explain lessons and discuss concepts with students. Also, No time for students to present research works."
- **Difficulty of identifying students' strengths and weaknesses:** "With online teaching, I cannot get acquainted with my students and know each one's profile. I am unable to identify their strengths, weaknesses and needs to adapt my teaching accordingly."
- **Flexible Online Learning:** "Yes, it differs from classroom teaching in many ways: it can be asynchronous allowing students to get at the teaching content at any time and can study it at their own pace. It can also allow students who live far or work to access courses distantly."
- **Need of teachers' motivation and Feedback:** "Provided students are motivated, they can get the most of online teaching. If teachers are also willing to give feedback online when students need it, that would be great too."

When asked about the strategies that the students are supposed to use in an attempt to deal with the online lectures, the teachers pointed out that the students need to use a wide range of strategies. These strategies are displayed in the following table.

Table 3: Favoured Strategies

Strategies students are supposed to use	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a. Skimming and scanning	1	2	1		
b. Overlook unfamiliar words		2	1	1	
c. Summarising	3	1			
d. Guessing meaning from context	1	3			
e. Inferences	1	3			
f. Use predictions	1	2	1		
g. Analysis	4				
h. Synthesis (establishing a connexion between the topics)	4				
i. Evaluation	3	1			
j. Doing extra research about key concepts	3	1			

According to the data presented in the table above, all the four teachers strongly agree that students are supposed to use the strategies of “analysis” and “synthesis.” Three teachers out of four strongly agree that the students are supposed to use the strategies of “summarising”, “evaluation” and “Doing extra research about key concepts.” Three teachers out of four agree that the students should use the strategy of “Guessing meaning from context” and “inferences.” Moreover, two teachers out of four agree that the students should use the following strategies: Skimming and scanning, Overlook unfamiliar words and Use predictions. One teacher added two other strategies that the students are supposed to use, namely self-and-peer assessment.

Within the context of Online teaching, the participant teachers assume the following roles to be fulfilled by the teachers.

Table 4: Teachers' Role(s) within Online Teaching

Teacher's Role	Put a tick, please
Information Provider	4
Guide	4
Adviser	4
Organiser	3
Negotiator	2
Supporter	4
Motivator	4
Other, please specify	Feedback provider, assessor

According to these results, the teachers are supposed to perform a variety of roles that received a consensus, namely information provider, guide, adviser, supporter and motivator. Three out of four teachers opted for the role of a teacher as an “organiser.” Only two teachers opted for the role of a teacher as a negotiator.

When asked about their opinion regarding students' preparedness to handle online learning, the majority of teachers (three out of four) answered by "no". Only one teacher explained that some of them are well prepared. Others are less prepared. This depends on their familiarity and use of the internet for learning. In an attempt to justify their answers, the following categories emerge. It is noteworthy that some of the teachers' answers contained more than one category.

- **Poor ICT Skills:** "While our students are skilled in using social media, they possess poor ICT skills and therefore meet difficulties in using word and PDF software."
- **Lack of Strategy Training Leading to Autonomy:** "They lack also autonomy and independence in learning as they have not been trained enough to use metacognitive strategies."
- **Lack of Motivation:** "No, they really lack motivation even to upload files from the platform. They cannot handle alone content sent to them via the net."
- **Need for authentic interaction and immediate feedback:** "As a teacher I am convinced that nothing can substitute for a physical class because the physical presence of a teacher in a real class ensures authentic interaction and immediate provision of feedback."
- **No specific training for the "unexpected" Online learning:** "There has been no training to handle online learning." "It is clear that nobody (both teachers and students) was really prepared for the covid19 pandemic, and we had to invent new behaviours, new methodologies, exchange experiences, etc."

When asked whether online teaching helps promoting the participants' students' autonomy, one teacher disagreed as she clarified:

No, I do not think so. The majority of students feel the need to have face-to face sessions in order to ask for clarifications and to benefit from teachers' guidance and feedback as well. With online teaching, most of them are lost and demotivated. Sometimes, they are not even aware of the lessons uploaded and they do not even download them nor print them. A good number of students show interest only in the two last sessions before the examinations.

Another teacher maintained that this can happen only if the students are autonomous as she reported, "I think that students need to be autonomous first to be able to handle online learning and not the reverse." More to the point, another teacher specified the strategy of doing extra research as a condition leading to autonomy, as she highlighted: "It may promote autonomy for the students who take the trouble to do necessary research in order to understand the lessons and those who read the teacher's suggested references." The only teacher who answered by "Yes, in many ways", did not explain this influence thoroughly.

The answers regarding teachers' perception of the concept of "An autonomous learner" are classified into categories as follows.

- **Self-regulation and self-monitoring:** "Autonomous learners monitor and self-regulate their learning."
- **Developing Research Skills and Avoiding Rote Learning:** "An autonomous learner is principally someone undertaking research..."
- **Self-Management, self-evaluation and socio-affective strategies:** "He knows how to manage his learning without the help of the teacher: planning, organizing content, evaluating his learning."
- **Responsibility for one's Learning:** "An autonomous learner is responsible for his learning. He should be able to self-assess his/her abilities, identify his strengths and weaknesses, and then make the adequate decisions to improve his abilities. To this end,

he can ask for teachers' guidance or go through a process of self-study by using appropriate internet resources. He should also be able to prepare for lessons by reading different sources on the same topic, take notes, summarise them in his own words, challenge the teacher's point of view, present arguments and counterarguments."

As regards teachers' perceptions of their online teaching experience, the participants vary in their viewpoints that range from a "nonsense", "disappointing" to a successful experience. Two teachers out of four specify that this type of learning cannot be considered as "online learning" as it lacks synchronous interaction through technological means, and it lacks motivation. Indeed, one of them highlighted:

I am quite disappointed with this experience. First, I do not think we can label the kind of teaching we delivered 'online teaching' as it was limited to uploading some lectures on the platform, which is not very motivating for students. I think online teaching involves more than this in that we should be given the opportunity to upload videos and use video calls in addition to webinars. This would stimulate students through interaction and discussions. This may not be possible as many students cannot invest in the technology required by online teaching.

The other teacher maintains this view and goes further to claim that this type of learning prevents the teacher to "feel as a teacher" as she explains:

If it is limited to just sending PDF's, I will certainly say that this is not teaching at all. Online teaching should be a simulation to the conventional teaching. Thus, since I am using the net just to send content to- and without interacting with my students, this 'online teaching' is nonsense for me. Hopefully, I regularly meet with my students in the physical class where I really feel a teacher.

One teacher stressed the need for professional development in online training, as this is an unprecedented teaching experience. Indeed, she highlights, "as we have not been trained to online teaching, I am a beginner. But, I strive to learn more and improve my teaching competence."

The last teacher considered the experience of online teaching as successful, as it has such benefits as improving and adjusting the quality of the teaching materials and methodology and enhanced collaboration with colleagues. She stressed: "from my perspective, it was rather successful. I learnt to handle online (asynchronous) teaching. It helped me design very clear and explicit handouts for my seminars, provide a great deal of examples..."

2.4.3. Students' Interview Results

Fourteen volunteer students agreed to respond to the questions of the interview. According to the results suggested by question 1, all the participants agreed that the experience of online learning is different from the traditional face-to-face classes. When asked to justify their answer, the following categories emerged.

➤ **Absence of student-teacher and peer interaction:** "It is totally different, because as human beings we need social interaction and praise from teachers..."

-**Absence of synchronous interaction:** "because it is new approach for us to deal with also there are so many problems we are facing them...for example technical issue, also teachers do not provide us with online sessions (Zoom) to get better understanding."

-Lack of teacher's guidance: "the learner online was only receiving information with no explanation, nor a real online class, so it was overwhelming to us as students to do all the work by ourselves."

- **Online learning fosters autonomy:** "we are responsible of our learning more than in previous years." "I think that we as learners are depending more on our own efforts...researches and all, with no more extra depending on teachers' feedback as used to."
- **Use of Technology means:** "because students are more involved in technology and new tips of apps that in the past were not be taken into consideration, except some problems."
- **Online learning Lacks systematicity/ Source of Confusion and Challenge:** "face to face classes give the students more context and can be studied in an organised manner unlike the online method which dumps everything on the student that ends up confused"
- **Online learning discourages motivation:** "It is very different and negative, because of the absence of teachers and interaction, it lowered my motivation to revise or study."

When asked whether they encountered difficulties or challenges while attempting to deal with the online lessons, the overwhelming majority of the participants (12 out of 14) claimed that they did face some challenges. The latter are presented in the following categories.

- **Physical absence of teachers:** "because no direct interaction between the teacher and learners exist. Without interaction there would be no understanding."
- **Lack of motivation:** "the Algerian student is generally unmotivated to study alone so a teacher's presence tends to be needed."
- **Physical absence of peers:** "No learner-learner interaction, no competition, as if we don't belong to groups."
- **Difficulty of lesson content:** "online lessons are difficult to understand without the explanation of the teacher."
- **Length of Lessons:** "teachers just post dozens of long lectures and assignments, and we cannot manage to handle them...we are not robots."
- **Non-mastery of ICT (Information and communication technology) tools**
- **Lack of effective strategies:**
 - Time management:** "When all the teachers post their lessons on Moodle at the same time, I find difficulty in managing my time to deal with the materials."
 - Weak research skills:** "I am aware that what our teachers send us is not enough to reach full understanding, but when I start doing research, I feel myself lost."

As regards the participant's perceptions of the notion of "autonomous learner", their views varied and were represented in the following categories.

- **Skills development without teachers' guidance:**
 - **Self-reliance and Independence from teacher help:** "a learner that is able to use various skills to learn with no need of the teacher." "The ability to learn by oneself, to tackle the subject individually, and be aware of your own abilities."
 - Accountability, Leadership and goal setting:** "to be able to hold yourself accountable and take leadership alongside with the identification of one's goals of learning."
 - Creativity, flexibility and strategy awareness:** "a creative and flexible learner who can create his own materials which related to the content course and who is aware of the appropriate strategies that may help him in his process."
- **Skills development under teachers' guidance:**
 - Research skills**

“Autonomous learner is an independent learner who make research and develops his/her learning process but with the guidance of their teachers.”

-Self-Assessment: “Autonomous learners, who do not expect from the teacher to give everything, but do their best to learn and self-assess alone.”

Social dimension (ask for help): “student who learns and manages his studies alone...by himself, but that doesn't mean not to asking for help and guidance.”

Though the participants' views about the autonomous learner varied, they all agreed that within the context of Online learning, autonomy is an important factor in academic achievement.

2.5. Discussion of the Results and Suggestions of Further Research

This section aims at answering the three research questions designed for the present study.

2.5.1. Online Learning and Learner Autonomy

As far as the first research question is concerned, the student participants' answers to the questionnaire (51.08%) seem to suggest a positive effect, though not considerable, of online learning on students' autonomous learning. This finding aligns with a number of research studies dealing with the effect of online learning on learner autonomy (e.g. Gottardi, 2015; Muhammad, 2020; Macia et.al. 2023). More particularly, the participants considered the autonomous learning features of “awareness of how to use language materials effectively”, “self-evaluation” and “self-management” to be reinforced compared to “an ability to define one's own objectives” and “the careful organization of time for learning”. Such a classification of learning autonomy characteristics goes hand in hand with the paradigm of “reactive autonomy” (Littlewood, 1999. Cited in Benson, 2008) or “co-directed learning” as highlighted by Holec (1981). Since “the ability to define one's own objectives” is not in the first positions, this implies that the students are not sharing in the process of setting up educational goals and, hence, are just reacting to the routes dictated for them. This supports the perception that within “teacher-centeredness” which is common in the Algerian educational system (Miliani, 2012; Fedj and Benaissi, 2018), students are still heavily dependent on their teachers.

In reacting to the interview questions, all the participants showed their awareness that autonomy is a pivotal factor to achieve academic success; nevertheless, their perceptions of the notion of “autonomous learner” varied enormously. While some of them acknowledged the “co-directed learning” implying skills development (research skills, self-assessment and socio-affective strategies) under teachers' guidance, other participants opted for skills development (such as accountability, leadership, goal setting, creativity, flexibility, strategy awareness) without teachers' guidance suggesting self-reliance and independence from teacher help. Such a vision is congruent with Holec's (2009. Cited in Palfreyman, 2020) “self-directed” paradigm related to autonomy or to use Littlewood's (1999. Cited in Benson, 2008) concept “proactive autonomy.” The latter is mainly shared by the teachers, taking part in this study, as the categories that emerged from teachers' perceptions of the concept of “an autonomous learner” included “responsibility for one's learning”, “self-management”, and “self-evaluation” among others.

Students' perceptions differ from teachers' perceptions regarding the positive effects of online learning on students' autonomy. Indeed, this finding does not align with what the teachers taking part in this study have stated, as only one teacher mentioned that the online experience helped to promote students' autonomy. Nevertheless, her answer was contradictory as she added a complaint about students' dependence on the teachers as she said, “but many students are still dependent on the teacher and need more help through onsite/classroom sessions.” The other two teachers highlighted that this

could happen only if the students are already autonomous and are doing extra research. Hence, autonomy and the strategy of doing research are two conditions leading to autonomous learning. The last teacher was categorical as she disagreed with this idea since she explained that the majority of students need teachers' help, guidance and motivation, and hence, are far from being autonomous.

As one of the components of learning autonomy adopted in this study is “the awareness of how to use language materials effectively,” we tried to explore the studying strategies used by the students to cope with online teaching materials. The findings suggest students' reliance on the strategy of summarizing compared to the strategies of “synthesis”, “evaluation” and “inferences.” Though three teachers (out of four) strongly agree with the use of the strategy of summarizing, students are not advocated to rely solely on it as such a strategy should be applied hand in hand with other strategies, namely “evaluation” and “doing extra research about key concepts”. However, on the top, all the four teachers “strongly agree” that the students are supposed to use “analysis” and “synthesis.”

Summarizing favors the meaning grasping of informational materials for the sake of the recalling of previously learned information, which is considered to belong to the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains (Armstrong, 2017). Such a finding is in line with a tradition of passively transferring facts and information recall. On the other hand, making inferences, which is at the core of the level of “analysis”, “synthesis”, and “evaluation” are considered as higher order thinking skills contributing to the complex intellectual growth of the students. Nevertheless, students seem not stimulated to effectively address higher levels of thinking.

More to the point, as students were asked to add any other strategies not proposed by the researcher, only two students (among 92) referred to “the socio-affective strategy” and one mentioned “the use of video-based learning”. This finding runs counter the social, collaborative and reciprocal dimension of learning which is supported by many researchers like Gottardi (2015), Eneau and Devellote (2012), and Fotiadou et al (2017). Indeed, Erarslan and Arslan (2019) stressed that the endeavor of reaching autonomy requires more than “learning by oneself” as it necessitates the awareness of the others' role in the learning process.

2.5.2. EFL Students' Preparedness for Online Learning

Regarding the second research question, although the overwhelming majority of the student participants (78.27%) stated that they have been prepared for online learning, the majority of teachers taking part in this study disagreed with the students' answers as they highlighted various reasons –no specific training for the “unexpected” online learning, need of authentic interaction and immediate feedback, lack of motivation, poor ICT skills and lack of strategy training leading to autonomy – not favouring a real students' preparedness to handle learning. Indeed, such researchers as Hadi (2018) call for the need of specific training, for both students and teachers, aiming at fostering students' autonomy. The need of authentic interaction and immediate feedback aligns with the perception of many researchers like Little (1990. Cited in Benson, 2001), Abed (2018), Conrad (2005. Cited in Fotiadou, 2017), Muhammad (2020) and Harasim (2012). Motivation is regarded as a crucial component leading to learner autonomy as supported by Nielson (2012) and Macia et. al. (2023). More to the point, Firat (2016) and Nielson (2012) advocate computer and internet literacy, through the mastery of ICT skills, as prerequisites to foster learner autonomy in an online setting. The need of strategy training leading to autonomy as one teacher reported, “...they have not been trained enough to use metacognitive strategies” is supported by Eneau and Devellote (2012) who maintain that developing metacognitive strategies is likely to reinforce “the reflective dimension” of learning fostering the autonomy of learners.

When asked about the modules that prepared them for tackling online lessons, the student participants opted mainly for the module of study skills (51.03%) as, according to them, it was the source of learning strategies like problem solving, doing research, time and stress management. Indeed, the strategy of doing extra research was the second strategy used by the students, after the strategy of summarising, as reported by the participants. Nevertheless, the participants contradict themselves when they mentioned the strategy of “time management”, as in the interview question seeking to explore whether they encountered difficulties in dealing with online lessons, time management was mentioned as among the challenges faced by the students. The participants considered two other modules, namely critical writing (26.53%) and reading and writing (20.40%) to contribute to their preparedness as the former is the source of critical thinking skills, and the latter is leading to effective reading and writing summaries and synthesis. This is in theory, but in practice, these findings contradict what already mentioned by the same participants who highlighted that the higher order thinking skills (the level of “analysis”, “synthesis”, and “evaluation”) are in the bottom of their use. Indeed, such modules as study skills, critical writing, reading and writing may have helped the participants to cope with the traditional on-site learning, but building students’ autonomy to face the unprecedented challenges of online learning requires more than what the previously mentioned modules may offer. A number of factors determines this endeavor. One of these factors is the intensive training in metacognitive strategies and internet literacy. In addition, synchronous interaction and immediate feedback using, for instance, videoconferencing, is advocated. More to the point, as already mentioned in the literature review, what fuels the whole process is motivation. The latter cannot be mentioned without dealing with the teachers’ role.

According to the findings, the student participants are aware of the roles that teachers may adopt within online learning as the majority of them regard their teachers not only as guides but also as motivators. This is in line with what the teachers reported to answer this question. Nevertheless, the student participants highlighted that, within on-site learning, teachers are regarded as information providers after being guides. This implies students’ awareness of the need of teachers’ guidance and motivation to cope with the demands of online learning.

2.5.3. EFL Students’ Perceptions of their Online Learning Experience

In an attempt to investigate students’ perceptions of their online learning experience, the student participants seem to hold mainly more negative than positive views regarding such an experience. Such a finding is congruent with the result of a study conducted by Erarslan and Arslan (2019) who maintained that the participants held both positive and negative opinions regarding online learning.

Interview findings suggest that the experience of online learning is different from the traditional face-to-face classes not only because it is characterized by the use of technology means, but also by the absence of student-teacher and student-student interaction. This implies, according to the sub-categories emerging from the student participants’ answers, absence of synchronous interaction and lack of teachers’ guidance. Moreover, according to the participants, such a mode of teaching discourages motivation and lacks systematicity leading to confusion. These emerging categories go hand in hand with what Nielson (2012:2) referred to as the “tendency among students to see themselves more like “knowledge receivers” than students taking responsibility for their own learning, a skill so fundamental in university education.” The same categories were recurrent when the majority of participants mentioned that they have faced various challenges ranging from physical absence of teachers and peers and lack of motivation.

Such student participants' views align with teachers' perceptions vis-à-vis their teaching experience within an online context, as they all stated its difference from the traditional face-to-face classes. Such a view is maintained for a number of reasons like absence of synchronous interaction, hence the need for teachers' motivation and feedback, time constraints, and difficulty of identifying students' strengths and weaknesses. For all these reasons, the majority of teachers go further not to consider such type of learning as "online learning."

The difficulty of online learning, according to the student participants, was stated for other reasons related to the teaching materials (length and difficulty of lessons), non-mastery of ICT, and lack of effective strategies such as weak research skills and time management. Indeed, such findings favour the idea that the students are still in need of teachers' guidance and support, and this is in line with the findings of a study carried out by Muliya et. al. (2020) who advocated "a transmission period from the traditional approaches to student-centered approaches." (P. 392)

The positive views of students related to online learning being a means fostering autonomy as one of the participants highlighted, "because this experience depends on students' autonomy and it's totally student-centered and too demanding and time consuming for students, but it enhances the level and proficiency of students." More to the point, one of the positive categories that appeared from teachers' answers is "flexible online learning" due to physical distance, and flexibility of such type of learning is maintained by Gottardi (2015) and Carliner (2004).

At length, it is noted that there is mainly a clear gap between participant students' perceptions and teachers' perceptions regarding the potential influence of online learning on learning autonomy. Such a major finding reflects the complexity of determining autonomy parameters – a major limitation encountered in this study. Further research is, hence, recommended to provide accurate perspectives on the notion of autonomy by developing standard e-learning autonomy scale and by offering insights into culture influence on autonomy. Though students are reluctant to adopt autonomous behaviors for the assumed cultural considerations, I agree with Fedj and Benaissi's (2018) perception that there is always a way to equip our learners with the necessary tools and strategies to cope with the new learning context. A first step paving the way for such an endeavour points out the need of students' awareness of the value and significance of learning in an autonomous way to survive in an unstable world.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Recommendations

The present study focused on exploring students' perceptions of learner autonomy in online learning. Autonomy is regarded, by all the participants taking part in this study, as an important factor in academic achievement. Though the major finding suggests that students' "reactive autonomy" is enhanced, to some extent, in an online setting, their reliance on the strategy of summarising implies that these students position themselves more like consumers of knowledge rather than responsible learners who are stimulated to effectively address higher levels of thinking. More to the point, both students and teachers assumed that they have been hindered by a number of challenges to cope with the new demands of this mode of learning/ teaching. As the current instructional practices in Algiers University maintain the hybrid mode of teaching, it is highly recommended to offer specific training for both teachers and students to cope with the new demands of this mode of learning. Students need intensive training in metacognitive strategies, internet literacy and ICT skills. In addition, it is crucial to explore the social dimension of autonomy by reinforcing authentic synchronous interaction between teachers and students and immediate feedback. Teachers' roles in motivating, guiding and supporting the students may play a pivotal role in producing responsible learners capable of realising their own success in the learning process.

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