Successful Project Works for Promoting Learner Autonomy of EFL Learners in Algerian Secondary Education

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ملخص:

هذه الدراسة تعد محاولة لتنمية اعتماد التلاميذ على انفسهم في دراسة اللغة الانجليزية في الطور الثانوي بالجزائر وذلك بالاستعمال الفعال للمشروع أو ما يسمى ايضا بالبحث . هاته الدراسة الميدانية تعنى بكيفية التعامل مع المشروع و اكتشاف ما اذا كان المشروع فعلا يساهم في تطوير استقلالية المتعلم . بعض الاقتراحات و التوصيات نقدمها للأساتذة و التلاميذ من اجل استعمال ناجح للمشروع من حيث التحضير و التقديم .

الكلمات المفتاحية : الاستقلالية — الأساتذة — التلاميذ-المشروع— التعليم الثانوي

Abstract

This study is an attempt to contribute in promoting learner autonomy in secondary education in Algeria through the appropriate use of project works. It is a case study designed to investigate how project works are dealt with and whether or not they are really promoting autonomy in EFL learners. Some suggestions and recommendations are provided for both EFL learners and teachers as a helping hand for successful projects works' design and presentation.
Key words: autonomy- project works-teachers- learners-secondary education

1-Introduction

The Algerian Ministry of Education has launched educational reforms in the academic year 2002-2003 so as to change the ancient teaching methodologies. The Competency-Based Approach was implemented in Algerian schools as an innovation. It is supposed that the CBA has reshaped teacher and learner roles and their responsibility in the language classroom. This approach aims at establishing learner-centeredness and producing responsible and autonomous learners who are expected to take charge of their learning. Introducing project works in English learning is not made until the secondary education, but pupils have used to such task in their middle level. The aim behind introducing project work to pupils is to foster their self- reliance in searching and, thus, learning English. The project work is useful in promoting learner autonomy. However, are project works really conducted in a way that promotes learners' autonomy? To answer this question a case study was held in first year (1AS) class in one of the secondary

schools called Tafna in Hassi El Ghella in the Wilaya of Ain Temouchent, with the use of two different research tools: a classroom observation to see how project work is presented by pupils and how it is assessed by the teacher. And a questionnaire to teachers so as to investigate the usefulness of project work in promoting learner autonomy for better English learning. It seems better to define autonomy first.

2- Definition of Learner Autonomy

There is no consensus on the concept of autonomy in education. It is a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed from many perspectives. One of the fields in which the concept of autonomy was firstly developed is politics. Autonomy as a political concept originated in the Ancient Greek, philosophers such as: Aristotle, and Socrates who claimed for citizens' right to self-government. Cities were governed according to citizens own laws. In this sense, individuals were considered free beings not subjected to others' authority. In the same context, Yule (1996) says that the autonomous person (like the autonomous state) must not be a subject to external interference or control but must rather freely direct the course of his own life.

It is generally agreed that the concept of autonomy first entered the field of learning and teaching through the council of Europe 's Modern Languages Project which was founded in 1971. The current debate about autonomy in second and foreign language learning originated in Holec's Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning first published in 1979, where he provides a definition of learner autonomy as: "to say of a learner that he is autonomous is to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning and nothing more ...to take charge of one's learning is to bear responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. (p.3) Little (1991) also argues that autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. According to him, the capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns, and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts. (p. 3-4).

Dickinson (1987) on the other hand, views learner autonomy as decision making in leaning context. Jeffries (1990) views it as learning in which an individual or a group of learners study on their own possibly for a part or parts of a course, without direct intervention from a tutor, so that to take a greater responsibility for what they learn.(p.35)

Jeffries definition of learner autonomy seems to be the most suitable for the sample population that are dealt with in this article (1AS pupils). This is because we are much more concerned with this kind of partial autonomy not with the full or total autonomy. The difficulty of defining learner autonomy is mainly due the fact that there are degrees of autonomy, and that the behavior of autonomous learners can change depending on their age, and how far they have progressed with their learning.

3- Project Works in ELT in Secondary Education

Project work involves a group of learners working together, and investing their school acquisitions so as to achieve a common end product. The aim behind introducing project works

for 1AS pupils is to develop autonomous learning and cooperation; this is what the Ministry of Education claims**.** The projects boot the learners' sense of achievement resulting in an increasing sense of responsibility, self-esteem, self-confidence, and autonomy in learning. (Teacher's guide of 1AS, 2003). Pupils of 1AS present a project at the end of the unit to prove that they have learnt information and that they can use it adequately out of the classroom. A good project requires learners to do autonomous research to find information for their project, they can look for in books, magazines from the school library, and they can ask their parents, friends or each other. If they have access to the internet they can search there. They may add pictures or posters.

The project work is a real - world task, a suitable teaching method that links knowing with doing. Projects change radically the relationship between school and all the social practices. It is more than writing what has been learnt in the classroom, it has some typical features that distinguish it from other learning activities. Project work emphasizes learners' involvement and responsibility.One of the most distinctive features of the CBA is its integration of project work as part and parcel of learning strategy.

Pupils of 1AS are required to present a project at the end of each unit, as an example at the end of unit one entitled: Getting through, they present a job application booklet. In unit two pupils are expected to write a book review in which they write a biography of the writer, a short summary of the book, characters, setting (time and place) and a short appreciation of the story. In unit three pupils should be able to conduct a survey and write an interview. In unit four, pupils make an invention profile in which they write an evolution of the invention, its models, and biographies of different inventors. The last project is about making a consumer guide in which they analyze the product and made adverts and labels. The layout of the project is presented at the end of the unit. However, the project is assumed to run in parallel with the courses. The fact that makes the learner starts to think with his peers about what to do and where to get information from. It is worth mentioning that letting learners free to join the group they want is highly recommended so that to foster learner autonomy. The CBA is based on project works as means for fostering pupis' self-reliance.

4- Case Study: Design and Application

The selection of the type of research is based mainly on the nature of the research itself. Learner autonomy is a phenomenon that actually happens both inside and outside the class. It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real- life context.(Nunan,1997). It is held in the class of first year pupils in Tafna secondary school.

According to Nunan methodologically, the case study is not restricted to one single method but uses range of several methods. Thus, we use a questionnaire for teachers and 1AS classroom was observed. As a hypothesis made for this study, we can say that the project work may be conducted inappropriately, however, through the research we may either give evidence to this hypothesis or disapprove it.

As far as the results obtained from the classroom observation, in the first session with the teacher, it is remarked that he did not introduce the topic of the project work, after finishing, I inquired why, the teacher answered that it was better to introduce the unit's theme first and later

to introduce the project. In fact, in the next session he has introduced the project. He asked pupils to open their textbooks on page where the instructions were written. The project is about making a profile of an invention. After referring them to the textbook the teacher took exactly 14 minutes to read and explain the steps of the project. After this session neither the teacher has talked again about the project, nor pupils have brought their works to be checked by the teacher. It was until the day of presentation when the project was mentioned, we attended two presentations, one about the typewriter and another one about the telephone. Well typed with pictures, i.e, ready made from cyber space. Surprisingly during the presentation pupils were unaware of what they were reading. They were incapable to answer their classmates' questions. The teacher was just listening and maintaining order.

Around fifty Secondary teachers in the Wilaya of Ain Temouchent were handed a questionnaire to be filled and given back. To investigate whether or not project works made by pupils of 1AS are really fostering autonomy in English learning, teachers are required to answer certain question Only 26% of them think that project works benefit pupils and help them develop their self-reliance. 74% of the informants do not agree with the others claiming that pupils are just copying from the internet. They do not make any effort, sometimes one pupil only takes charge to gather money and get a readymade project from the cyber space. Therefore, no autonomy can be achieved from such project works. Most of teachers (80 %) admitted that their pupils and even teachers lack the ingredients for better project work designing and presentation.

5-Research Findings
     The project work first aim is promoting learner autonomy, however, according to the teachers no autonomy can be achieved from these projects since they are ready made, they do not benefit the pupils. In this context Baiche (2008) ironically says: "the only person who benefits from the project work is the cyber space manager because he is paid to do it." (p.116). As for learners they are as Bassou (2007) puts awkwardly guided, they appear to be in "no   man's land", not knowing where to go and how to reach their destination. In the minds of their teachers they are working in groups, fairly dividing the tasks among themselves, doing their own research and collaborating to construct their projects, but the reality revealed in the data has proved the contrary.

     In his research about project works in Algerian educational context, Bassou (2007) has deduced that 1AS pupils are not given the full ingredients of classroom practices for project work realizations that make of them more aware, responsible and autonomous learners. Similarly Baiche (2008) says: "…We understand that the project is not carried out seriously, and seems to be a useless work altogether." (p.162). Moreover, the project work is a demanding task on the language teacher. We conclude that the project is a fundamental means of promoting learner autonomy in secondary schools, this is why it should be done seriously and effectively to contribute in promoting learner autonomy.
It is true the aim behind introducing the projects in the Algerian schools is fostering learner autonomy as stated by the Ministry of Education. However, most pupils do not make sufficient efforts in them. In the contrary, according to Belouahem. R (2008)**:** "... seeking information from the internet never helps the learner to provide a personal effort. It would be better if it was simplified into a simple report since the learners are not ready to be in such a wide complex dimension. (p.211*).* According to him, simple reports written in pupils' own style is better than a

readymade project work**.** Moreover, the project work is too demanding for both the teachers and the pupils because both are not well prepared to deal with project works and they really need a helping hand.

6- Steps Towards Successful Project work

We have already dealt with projects in secondary schools, the way they are organized and presented. We have reached the conclusion that the basic tool educational institutions designed for promoting learner autonomy is a useless work all together. In fact, no autonomy can be achieved from readymade projects in which pupils did not do the least of independent research. Projects are considered as the best way to develop learners independence.(In fact, if they are carried out successfully).Teachers have a great responsibility in establishing an environment in which learners are motivated and interested in doing such task as stressed by Papandreou (1994) effective use of projects approach for teaching English depends on the teacher. From the beginning, the teacher should motivate the pupils to set up the right environment for this type of work.(p.14). Motivation seems to be not the only difficulty in projects. The lack of information and documents in the school library send pupils to cyberspaces, because access to the internet in secondary schools is limited if not nonexistent. For this reason, textbook designers should take the level of pupils into consideration while designing the project, it should require information easy to be found and collected (Baiche, 2008).

For a successful realization of projects Stoller (1995) has proposed steps for orchestering project work. The model is successful after being tested in different language classrooms, these steps need clarification for better application in the realization of the project.

Step1: Teachers should help pupils develop a sense of ownership towards the project, i.e, students should be given a chance to select the project theme.

Step2: Teacher and pupils determine the final outcomes of the project as an example: a debate, an interview, handbook, oral presentation and theatrical performance. etc.

Step3: Teacher and pupils discuss the details from the starting point until the completion of the project: the source of information, role play in the group (who does what), and the time for the project.

Step4: Teacher provides pupils with language forms and skills that match the information to be gathered, in a debate, for instance, the teacher may plan activities in which pupils question, request clarification, give opinions, agreeing and disagreeing.

Step5: Pupils use different sources for the collection of information related to the project's theme.

Step6: Learners analyze and synthesize information. They do this through activities presented by the teacher such as: making comparison, graphic display, charts, etc.

Step7: Pupils discuss the value of the already gathered information, select the most suitable information for the project and remove the others.

Step8: Teacher prepares pupils for the presentation of the project through focusing on activities on pronunciation, organizing ideas, etc.   .

Step9: Pupils are ready to present the final outcome of their projects.
Step10: Pupils are asked to reflect on their project work to check its effectiveness. They are required to reflect on what worked well and what did not. (Stoller, 1997).

If they want the project to be a real means for fostering learner autonomy, EFL teachers in Algeria may follow the steps provided in the model above. However, they need further clarification about their roles as teachers, facilitators and guides in the realization of the project work. In the next section, both teachers and pupils are provided with roles to play for a successful project work.

7 Teachers and Students Roles in the Project

During the classroom observation the teacher presents the project and later neither he nor the pupils mention it until the day of the presentation. This is not the right way teachers and learners should deal with the project. Instead the language teacher may be a guide, facilitator and even a group member. He may also prepare activities for learners and provide feedback. In Algerian secondary education not only EFL teachers need to be aware of their roles in the project work, pupils also have certain roles to play in the realization of the project. Papandreou (1994) contrasts the role of both language teachers and learners in the project works; the table below illustrates these roles:

	pupil	Teacher
Topic	Select topic	Describe parameters and suggests
Objectives	Set final objectives	Help in setting objectives
Preparation	directs	advises
Planning	directs	Contributes ideas
Time	Plans schedule	Make suggestions
Research	Coordinate and implement	Observe and facilitate
Result	analyzes	Observes
Presentation	Performs	Listen as a member of the audience
Evaluation	Participates in self-evaluation	Provides feedback.

Table 1   Teacher's and students' roles in projects. (Papandreou, 1994:42)

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It is noticeable from the table that a great responsibility in the realization of the project work lays on pupils' hands. The verbs Papandreou (1994) uses clarifies the difference, for pupils' roles he uses the verbs: select, set, directs, plan, coordinate; analyze, perform. Whereas, for teachers he uses describe, suggest, help, observe, listen and provide. If teachers and pupils play the required roles in the project work successfully, another step would have been taken towards autonomy in our secondary schools. When pupils reach university, they will be prepared to engage in independent research.

It is clear from the research findings that not only teachers but also pupils lack the ingredients for better project work, either in term of designing, managing or presenting. There are many ways learners can be initiated to carry out projects. They can gather information if they read books, newspapers, listen to radio, watch TV, consult websites, talk to people, observe events and proceedings, interpret and report. According to Rama (2011) a project can be carried out in many ways. Algerian EFL pupils may find the following steps put by her highly beneficial.

- **Selecting and briefing:** learners and teachers decide on a topic. It is better to encourage pupils to bring their own ideas and have an individual choice.
- **Planning and language generation:** Having chosen a topic for the project, pupils now work together to decide upon the plan to follow and what kind of language points to be used. In this phase learners need guidance and support.
- **Collection of date /information / details:** Pupils gather required   information from a number of sources. They can consult encyclopedia, read books, interview people, collect pictures and illustrations, record audio / video, visit internet, watch TV, etc. They can write their field notes to remember and organize the data collected.
- **Planning, writing the draft and editing:** Having collected the required data / information and ideas, it is time to write the draft.
- **The result and presentation:** The final product may be written report, a play, collection of songs or enacting a play or a big role play, writing posters, etc. Learners are now asked to submit to the teacher and present it to the whole class or to the whole school during assembly or special occasions (in case of play, songs, etc.)
- **Follow Up:** Pupils should use language in contexts. For example, a project given in the list at the end is about class newspaper. This could be explored as a continuous feature and some other group could try the next issue of the newspaper / magazine.

8 Project Assessment and Evaluation

Project is a tool for promoting learners' self-reliance in doing independent research from the teacher. It is also a tool that allows teachers to check whether or not learners have attained the desired objectives. It helps teachers becoming aware of the effectiveness of their teaching and their learners' abilities. How a project can be evaluated is a worth asking question. In the evaluation both the process and the product are focused on. Within the CBA no evaluation grids are available in the textbooks or the documents of presentation. Before project presentation, the teacher has to set the evaluation criteria and both parents and pupils should know about the

evaluation of this task. (Bassou, 2007). The teacher can give groups a checklist or a copy of the instrument that will be used to grade their project or make a poster for the classroom wall. This help pupils know what to give importance to and what to spend more time on beforehand. (Oswald, 2005).

Teachers are concerned with the evaluation of the project. Pupils as well through self-assessment strategy which is based on reflection. The final step of the design is evaluation. Pupils are asked to reflect on their work. Only by doing this, they can learn from their experiences and become more confident and monitor their learning. Through self-assessment learners can develop self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in language learrning (Fleming, 2000).

Oswald (2005) has provided teachers with two samples of project evaluation, we have selected the one below because it seems more practical for teachers see the table below:

Did Learners	No 0	Slightly 1-2	Generally 3	Mostly 4	Yes 5
1-Do independent research to find information for the project?					
2-Apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate somehow process the information?					
3-Support their work with pictures, drawing, photographs or graphic organizers (charts, graphs, mind maps, Venn diagrams, etc.)?					
4-Prepare a project that is interesting for their classmates?					
5-Include the planning tool they used to collect and organize their ideas?					
6-Correctly use the required tense to develop their project writings					
7-Correctly use the language forms seen in the unit to develop their project writings?					
8-spell and punctuate their work correctly?					

Mark/Learners' total score..../40 =.......points of 20				

Table 2   A sample of project evaluation. (Oswald, 2005)

During the realization of the project pupils neither exercise individual autonomy nor group autonomy. Autonomy is useful for students as language learners and as social beings. In our secondary education project preparation and presentation need reconsideration. Project should not be seen as an add on task but rather a highly beneficial task that consolidates and extends learning, increases motivation, enhances classroom dynamics, and promote learner autonomy.(Sandy, 2006) . Successful project work is one of the basic steps towards fostering learner autonomy in our schools. However, certain materials and study aids should be provided for learners for the successful realization of the project works.

9 Suggested Types of a Better Project work

Besides the fact that project works can foster learners' autonomy, they can also establish an interesting atmosphere in the classroom; first, the project strengthens cooperativeness and makes shy learners involved. Second, it is fun! To get out of the tedious class sessions, that is to say it is a fun break from structured lessons and also gives the teacher a break, it is learners' turn now to present, explain, and illustrate. Zehni N. (2006) proposes certain forms to give relevance to the project, that is to say to give the project farther dimensions, she proposes the followings:

1-Class magazine: EFL pupils brainstorm types of magazine and what sections and topics to find within them for instance: fashion, agony aunt, technology, food and drink, news etc. The teacher may bring different types of magazines to his learners to use them as a model. Learners can decide what they like to write about, when they feel ready, they can attempt a first draft and hand it to the teacher for correction; Learners are free in the choice of a title to their magazine. Teachers in the same school can organize competitions to select the best class magazine.

2- Perfect EFL School Brochure: EFL pupils may help in the improvement of their school, they think of what can be improved and how? And they can give their ideas about perfect language school. In groups pupils may write accommodation description, class schedule, teacher profiles, interview with the director, etc.

3- Surveys: they are always favorite because pupils can find their data out of school, the teacher can suggest certain topics and make his pupils into groups and let them decide where to go and what they would like to survey such as restaurants, factories, hotels, foreigners perception of the country. When they are happy with materials they have collected now they decide how to present the information on graphs, paragraphs and posters.

EFL teachers may find it useful to keep the best examples of learners' works in the classroom as a model to be followed by new pupils, and can give them an idea about the level of work they are expected to do. .

10 Conclusion

Autonomy is one of the general objectives of English learning in the secondary education. After analyzing the data the research has reached certain findings and present suggestions and recommendations for EFL teachers and learners alike for promoting learner autonomy through the use of the project work. The findings have given evidence to the research hypotheses. Pupils in secondary education and teachers alike lack the ingredients for better project work designing and presentation. In attempts to promote a higher level of learner autonomy in Algerian schools, it is important to encourage project works, as well as, the use of a variety of published and authentic materials. It is supposed that Algerian EFL pupils are partially autonomous in their secondary education; once they reach university they will become fully autonomous. As English teachers, it becomes their responsibility to not only teach a language, but also presenting tasks that inspire the pupils to take learning into their own hands. Finally, autonomy in learning is a process and not a product that many EFL pupils seek today. Autonomy requires understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses. It is hard to establish learner autonomy in our schools in which both teachers and learners are still in need of preparation. It seems likely that the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning is an area that will continue to grow and several researches will be done for looking for the best ways in fostering learner autonomy. The researcher hopes that this study would provide an example of promoting pupils' autonomy through successful project works; and would also be useful in helping teachers to promote it in their classes, so that the language proficiency level will gradually progress.

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