

التعلم الذاتي في أوقات الأزمات: وجهات نظر وتجارب المعلمين الليبيين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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الملخص باللغة العربية :

هذه الدراسة محاولة لإبراز أهمية التعلم الذاتي في أوقات الأزمات. واعتمدت على الدروس المستفادة من نقشي وباء كورونا وكيفية مواجهته في مجال التعليم وخاصة تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية. وتبنت الدراسة نهجاً نوعياً من خلال توزيع استبيان نوعي على 73 معلماً ومفتشاً لبيياً من معلمي و مفتشي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، بالإضافة إلى إجراء مقابلات مع ثمانية منهم. ومن أهم النتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة ، أن العديد من مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية ليس لديهم معرفة كافية بمفهوم التعلم الذاتي. أما الآخرون ، فعلى الرغم من معرفتهم بالتعلم الذاتي ، إلا أنهم لم يتبنوه في الفصل. ومع ذلك ، افاد بعض المعلمين عن محاولاتهم للجوء إلى التعلم الذاتي لتوفير الوقت والجهد. وعلى الرغم من أنها كانت محاولات بسيطة ، إلا أنها تشير إلى إمكانية وفعالية تبني التعلم الذاتي في المدارس الليبية. أخيراً ، اقترحت الدراسة بعض التوصيات التربوية لاعتماد التعلم الذاتي وحثت على النظر في دوره الهام في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية.

Autonomous Learning in Times of Crises: EFL Libyan Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences

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Abstract

This study attempted to highlight the importance of autonomous learning in times of crisis. It relied on lessons learned from the outbreak of the Corona epidemic and how it was confronted in the field of education. The study adopted a qualitative approach by distributing a qualitative questionnaire to 73 EFL Libyan teachers and inspectors, in addition to conducting interviews with eight of them. The most important findings are that many English language teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the concept of autonomous learning. As for others, despite their knowledge of autonomous learning, they did not adopt it in the classroom. However, some teachers reported their attempts to resort to autonomous learning to save time and effort. Although they were simple attempts, they indicate the possibility and



effectiveness of adopting autonomous learning in Libyan schools. Finally, the study suggested some pedagogical recommendations for the adoption of autonomous learning and urged to consider its crucial role in in English language classes.

Introduction

No one knows yet the complications of the Corona pandemic that has swept the world since the year 2020. The complications are not only related to health aspects, but also include economic, political, educational and other sectors. However, the education sector, which is what concerns us here, was the most affected, especially in the third world countries. This pandemic has taken its toll on countries that already suffer from low educational infrastructure and low quality standards. Many precautionary measures have been taken to confront the pandemic, including closing schools or reducing classroom hours, which negatively affected the educational process. In order to avoid the damage caused by the spread of this pandemic, many countries have resorted to technological methods such as blended education, distance education, education through other media and electronic applications via the internet. In sum, all of these procedures are cantered on one basis, which is autonomous learning.

Autonomous learning is not a new concept; it has been dealt with by specialists in the field of education for a long time. Furthermore, scholars who specialize in teaching a foreign language urge its adoption because of its many benefits accruing to the learner and the teacher. However, the spread of the Corona pandemic, which, at the time of writing this paper, the world is still floundering in addressing it, is what made us refocus on autonomous learning. This is because of its paramount importance that we need now in the time of Corona and beyond, and in the time of all crises, especially those facing fragile countries such as Libya today.

This paper deals in particular with the importance of autonomous learning on learning English as a foreign language in Libya. It begins with a discussion of the concept of autonomous learning and its importance, then moves on to investigating the extent of Libyan teachers' awareness of this concept and their vision of the possibility of relying on autonomous learning to avoid the complications of the Corona pandemic and all the crises that Libya is going through. It concludes with recommendations that the educational decision-

maker in Libya can rely on, and the teacher and student alike can benefit from them.

Literature review

It is not easy to give an accurate definition of autonomous learning. For more than three decades, researchers have dealt with autonomous learning according to different definitions. Holec (1981) gave a famous definition of autonomy: “the ability to take charge of one's own learning” (3). Similarly, Benson (2011:58) states that autonomous learning is "the capacity to take control of one's learning". In general, autonomous learning refers to that situation in which the learner is given a wide range of freedom to learn in terms of choosing what he/she learns and how to learn effectively and not make them a passive recipient. The learner's self-reliance in many aspects of the educational process increases his/her motivation and desire to learn more (Chan et al., 2002).

Many researchers have addressed the importance of autonomous learning in learning foreign languages. Some of them discussed its importance in raising the motivation of the learners and motivating them to be self-reliant inside and outside the classroom (Lamb, 2001; Ushioda, 2003). On the other hand, some researchers dealt with methods and strategies for promoting autonomous learning among students (Almusharraf, 2020). Others also addressed the relationship between autonomous learning and language proficiency, and it was found that there is a positive relationship between readiness for autonomous learning and foreign language proficiency (Sakai and Takagi, 2009; Myartawan, Latief, Suharmanto 2013). However, to my knowledge, I did not find a study dealing with the importance of autonomous learning in times of crises such as the Corona pandemic or others. Therefore, this study came to focus, in one of its aspects, on the important role of autonomous learning that may compensate for the negative effects of crises on education in general, and more specifically, EFL teaching and learning. The learner equipped with autonomous learning strategies is able to cope with the crises caused by interruptions in study and the loss of the interactive classroom atmosphere.

In the twenty-first century, the century that was marked by the information and technology revolution, it became easy for learners to develop autonomous learning skills and rely on themselves in many educational tasks. The internet,



social media, and smart phones have effectively contributed to the attention paid to the importance of autonomous learning, due to its essential role in enhancing the learner's responsibility and freedom (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Bhattachary & Chauhan, 2010). In addition to writing diaries, using portfolios, and vocabulary notebook; electronic applications, YouTube, interactive programs, electronic dictionaries, email, WhatsApp and others all provide a wonderful service for learners to rely on themselves in developing their language skills, whether in the classroom or outside it ; on or offline.

The teacher bears the greatest burden in training students to be autonomous learners and to be more responsible in the learning process. The learner alone cannot realize the importance of autonomous learning, especially after he/she has become accustomed to relying on the teacher for everything. Traditional teacher-centred education makes it difficult to develop the learner's abilities to take initiative and be responsible for learning. This challenge, that faces teachers, requires treatment as a first step. As stressed by many autonomy researchers, the treatment could be carried out by organizing training courses for teachers to develop students' autonomous learning skills (Benson, 2010; Smith, 2003) .

In the EFL classroom, the teacher is required to focus on several basic factors that collectively contribute to the development of autonomous learning among students. These basic factors can be summarized in the following points:

- 1- Presenting the lesson objectives and the classroom activities clearly to the students.
- 2- Involving students in choosing some of the tasks and activities.
- 3- Teaching students learning strategies. Many studies have emphasized the importance of student learning of self-reliant learning strategies and making the student more positive in and outside the classroom.
- 4- Urging students to discover their learning styles. "Learning styles are the general approaches –for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual –that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject." (Oxford,2003:1). Clarifying this to students and urging them to use the appropriate style for them when learning helps a lot in the success of their learning and raises their motivation especially outside the classroom.

5- Encouraging students to use technology. This is done by introducing some programs, tools and applications that help develop their different language skills. The formation of communication networks, discussion rooms and special pages on social media make the educational process extend outside the classroom and save a lot of time and effort, especially in times of crises such as the spread of the Corona pandemic or civil wars. It is well known that most students use smart phones that can be used to develop their language skills, especially in times of crisis.

6- Designing some activities and tasks that start inside the classroom and do not end outside it.

These are the most important foundations on which the development of autonomous learning among students should be based. If these factors were adopted together, they would help the student to realize the importance of autonomous learning and raise his/her motivation. On the other hand, these factors stimulate and encourage students' activeness and motivation; eventually they become autonomous and take responsibility for developing their language skills (Balçıkanlı, 2010). In addition, the students' awareness of the role of the teacher increases, which is the assistant, the manager, and the guide, not the dominant and the only source of knowledge and information. The important result of all these is to save effort and time, especially in times of crisis, where the students' attendance at school is intermittent and it is difficult to cover all the course syllabuses on time. Autonomous learning contributes effectively to extending learning outside the classroom. The objectives of the lessons are also achieved outside the classroom, and this is what is required by crisis conditions such as what is happening in Libya these years.

Libyan context

English is considered as a foreign language in Libya. It has been taught in public schools and universities since the country's independence in 1951. Like other similar countries, traditional teaching curricula were adopted, such as grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method. With the advent of the communicative approach revolution, the curricula were modified to conform to the many theories in learning the English language. However, the dominance of the traditional curricula is still clear despite the issuance of textbooks based on the latest teaching methods. However, what the country



faced from various crises, in education sector, made it necessary to take an important and quick step to address the repercussions of these crises. This step, which is suggested by this study, is to focus on the adoption of autonomous learning.

This study suggests the serious adoption of autonomous learning as an attempt to compensate for what many crises have caused to the educational process in general and to teaching English in particular. These crises are not limited to the Corona pandemic only, but also include other crises that Libya was exposed to after the year 2011, such as frequent power cuts and civil wars that caused the suspension of school in many cities, in addition to the sudden movement of students from one school to another during their study. All of these factors have affected the educational process, either by school closure for weeks or months, reducing the class time, or deleting some lessons from the curriculum.

There have been some attempts to address the repercussions of these crises on the educational process. Among these solutions is the allocation of a television channel to broadcast some lessons, the use of internet programs and applications and the integrated curriculum. However, these attempts depend, in general, on the availability of electricity and the internet, which cannot be guaranteed in all cases and places. Accordingly, this study attempts to investigate the feasibility of adopting autonomous learning to reduce the negative effects of these crises.

Methodology

This paper presents the concept of autonomous learning and discusses it from two angles: the first from the theoretical point of view, which includes the importance of autonomous learning for learners and their motivation. It also discusses the consensus of specialists on the necessity of adopting this trend in education in general and foreign language teaching in particular. The paper also focuses on the strategies used in the use of autonomous learning within the classroom of teaching English as a foreign language. At the end of the theoretical part, the paper discussed the most important fallacies about autonomous learning that teachers, educators, or educational decision-makers might believe. We discussed all of this in the previous part. From a practical point of view, the paper attempts to investigate the view of teachers and

inspectors in Libya towards autonomous learning by trying to answer the following questions:

- What are the perspectives of teachers and inspectors in Libya on the concept of autonomous learning?
- Are EFL Libyan teachers and inspectors aware of the importance of autonomous learning in times of crisis?
- What are the teachers' experiences of adopting autonomous learning in English language classes?

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection, represented by a qualitative questionnaire that was distributed to 73 teachers and inspectors in the cities of Tripoli, Bani Walid and Tarhuna. In addition to conducting interviews with 8 teachers from Tripoli and Bani Walid who were included in the study. The data were analysed objectively based on the questions asked.

Discussion

The primary data extracted from the qualitative questionnaire that was distributed to 73 teachers and inspectors of the English language indicate the following:

Total	teachers	Inspectors	Graduation College			
			Education	Arts	Languages	
73	65	8	43	24	6	

From this table, it is clear that most of the participants in this study were teachers, while the number of inspectors was only 6. The focus in this study was on teachers, as they are the ones who actually practice teaching and have a direct relationship with the students while the inspectors have the experience, which enables them to follow up and guide the teacher. On the other hand, it is clear that most of the participants were graduates of faculties of education, comprising 58.9%, followed by graduates of faculties of arts, with a percentage of 32.8%, and finally, graduates of language faculties of languages, with a percentage of 8%. In terms of the data they provided in the qualitative questionnaire, they were as follows:

When asked about the concept of autonomous learning among the participants in the study and their view of it, their answers varied. On the one hand, the participants agreed on their knowledge of the autonomous learning. But they differed in its definition. Some of them defined it as learning without a



teacher, i.e. home learning. Others defined it as informal learning, that is, without engaging in the educational system through schools and educational institutions. It became clear from the data that most of those who adopted this definition or something similar were graduates of faculties of arts and languages. Despite these broad definitions of the concept of autonomous learning, some researchers have adopted it, but the consensus of specialists in the field of education in general and English language teaching in particular do not agree with these definitions, but rather provide narrower and more accurate definitions and do not exclude the role of the teacher or the educational institution (Mesibov & Drmacich, 2022).

It can be said that the teachers who made these broad definitions, and most of them are graduates of the faculties of arts and languages, did not study with good concentration the fields of foreign language learning and teaching, teaching methods, theories, techniques and various strategies that are known in the English language teaching class. Since most of the graduates of faculties of arts and languages in Libya tend to teach after graduation, this aspect must be taken care of and English language teaching methods should be included in their curricula.

However, the paradox comes from the participants who showed good knowledge of the concept of autonomous learning and strategies for its development among students. The paradox is that these teachers and inspectors, in practice, embrace teacher-centred education. Their answers, in the qualitative questionnaire and the interviews conducted with some of them, showed that they do not like the methods of learner-centred education and prefer traditional education despite their awareness of the importance of the role of students and their right to be autonomous learners by teaching them autonomous learning strategies and developing critical thinking and autonomous learning skills. They justified this approach by the lack of time and the requirements of the final exams, which are centrally supervised by the Ministry.

This leads us to the teacher's role in developing autonomous learning skills. Many studies (Chik, Aoki, & Smith, 2018) have stressed the importance of raising the teacher's awareness of the importance of autonomous learning and raising his/her efficiency by training on methods and strategies for developing autonomous learning among students. If the teacher is not convinced of the

importance of autonomous learning or is not able to adopt it, then the student alone cannot achieve their autonomy in the classroom and relies on themselves. On the other hand, the negative impact of exams needs to be addressed by the educational decision maker. The negative effects of exams hinder the application and adoption of modern teaching methods and negatively affect the outcomes of the entire educational process.

Another fallacy that some teachers and inspectors participating in this study fell into is that the activities and tasks that develop autonomous learning consume a long time in the classroom, which affects the completion of the syllabus and the achievement of its goals in the required time. This opinion indicates that the participants believe that autonomous learning takes place only in the classroom; while among the aims of autonomous learning is to reduce the burden on the teacher and invest time outside the classroom in autonomous learning activities and accomplish many tasks that were accomplished in the classroom and consumed a long time. Autonomous learning saves time, not consumes it.

In general, most of the participants see that autonomous learning has a role in avoiding the complications of the Corona crisis or any other crisis. Hence the importance of this study, which confirms that the total reliance on the school and the teacher and the adoption of teacher-based education contributes greatly to the severity of the damages resulting from any crisis that the country is going through and negatively affects the educational process. The absence of awareness of the concept of autonomous learning and how to adopt it in the English language classroom makes it almost impossible to achieve the outcomes of the curriculum in the midst of crises. This is evident in the low educational outcomes that are touched by all stakeholders. Whereas, if students learned autonomous learning strategies and completed some activities and tasks outside the classroom and relied on themselves in learning, this would motivate them to continue and achieve curriculum objectives despite all the circumstances resulting from the crises, and this would save the time and effort of the teacher without any reduction of the syllabuses of the course .

Teachers' Experiences

When the participants were asked whether they had any experiences in adopting autonomous learning during the various crises the country is going



through, five teachers answered that they had experiences of this kind. Although this number is small for a total of 73 participants, these simple experiments give an indication of the possibility of moving to autonomous learning in Libyan schools because of its impact on the educational process on the one hand, and on saving time and effort in times of crisis on the other hand.

One of the teachers from a language centre in Tripoli said that the experience was interesting, even though it was her first. She had to resort to autonomous learning due to the irregularity of the study and the absence of some learners for various reasons, which led to the possibility of not covering all the course syllabuses in the appropriate and specified time. "I shared the lessons between me and the students," said the teacher. In the conversation lesson, for example, the teacher and the learners chose the topic and determined its objectives. Then she asked them to search for relevant vocabularies and expressions at home. When they come to class the next day they talked about this topic in groups under the teacher's supervision. The teacher directed the learners to some websites on the internet that can help them develop their speaking skill. The teacher, also, noticed that the lesson took less time after the learners participated in selecting and preparing it and carrying out some tasks outside the classroom.

Another teacher says that the students were more motivated and active when she asked them to search the internet for some names of places and people in the lesson they would be studying the other week. They worked hard to gather enough information in English about these names and brought some pictures as well. "They were also repeating some words and expressions related to the lesson in the classroom, and sometimes they would precede me in mentioning the information."

A teacher in a public school said that developing the skill of writing and using some expressions takes a long time if we limit ourselves to presenting them in the class only. So I asked students to write their diaries, and every day we had fifteen minutes for discussing any difficulties they encountered in writing their diaries. At the end of each month the students chose extracts from their diaries and publish them in the wall newspaper dedicated to the English language, and in their private room on the Whats App. "It was a great experience that the students and I benefited from, and it was enjoyable as we

maintained the achievement of the lesson's objectives without wasting a long time." (teacher).

Moreover, two teachers in a girls' secondary school, said that in each lesson they had encouraged the students to identify the things in which they excel, such as grammar, spelling, speaking...etc. Knowing the student's strengths increases his/her motivation and urges them to continue to do so, as asserted by Moir (2019). On the other hand, the diversity of students in the class in terms of their points of excellence makes them an integrated team that supports each other and learns from each other, which makes them all progress and achieve the objectives of the course.

Despite the small, simple and incomplete experiences that some teachers have experienced, there is a clear indication of the importance of autonomous learning in compensating for the loss of time, that is, in crisis situations such as those in our country. Teaching learners some learning strategies in order to rely on themselves saves time and effort. This eventually contributes effectively to achieving the objectives of the learning process.

However, the data collected by this study indicated that teachers who tried to motivate students to be autonomous learners did not have sufficient knowledge and mature skill to achieve this goal. This may be the result of the lack of continuous training for the teachers to raise and develop their skills. The teachers' attempts were individual ones that did not depend on a solid reference or foundations, but they were better than nothing in any case.

Conclusion

This study focused on the importance of autonomous learning in times of crisis. It relied on the lessons learned from the outbreak of the Corona epidemic, which caused schools to stop and negatively affected the educational process in the whole world. However, developed countries have been able to put in place effective and quick solutions, due to the advanced means they possess to confront such crises. As for Libya, as a developing country, and suffering from political and social crises, the matter was different. In Libya, there are several crises, which require dealing with them with all seriousness and wisdom. There are lessons ahead of us that can be learned from our interaction with the Corona pandemic, in which we have shared the world. One such lesson is the adoption of autonomous learning. As this study dealt with, autonomous learning does not mean dispensing with the



school and the teacher, but rather it is a strategy to help the teacher and compensate for any imbalance resulting from the effects of the crises that the country is going through.

Adopting autonomous learning in teaching English as a foreign language to avoid the negative effects of these crises requires an effort from educational decision-makers to enrol teachers in training courses on autonomous learning. We cannot teach the student how to be autonomous, and the teacher is still not aware of the importance and techniques of autonomous learning. It might be clear from the study that there are several fallacies about autonomous learning that teachers have which need to be corrected.

However, the simple experiments carried out by some teachers indicated the importance of the topic of this study. These experiences confirmed the importance of autonomous learning in making up for any shortfall in the educational process in times of crisis, and that learners and teachers were able to change the learning and teaching style to keep pace with the times. On the other hand, the study showed that these experiments were immature individual attempts and were not built on strong foundations. Hence, this study recommends exerting more effort and attention to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of autonomous learning and the need to recognize it in EFL classroom in order to save effort and time in a country that has lost a lot in the midst of these various crises.

Pedagogical implementations

This study emphasizes the significance of adopting autonomous learning by EFL Libyan teachers because of its importance in compensating for any defect in the educational process due to crises. Moreover, the role of the educational inspector is also very important in motivating the teacher to make an effort to adopt this method in the classroom. Curriculum designers, also, bear the greatest burden in designing exercises and tasks that contribute to raising teachers' and students' awareness of how to be autonomous.

Future studies

This study relied on a qualitative approach and on a limited sample. Therefore, more quantitative studies on a large scale is important in knowing all aspects of the subject. Experimental studies can also be conducted on the adoption of self-learning and knowledge of its dimensions and impact on various levels

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