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Learner autonomy and blended learning: a qualitative investigation of the experiences of Algerian learners of English as a foreign language

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Learner Autonomy and Blended Learning: A Qualitative Investigation of the Experiences of Algerian Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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**A thesis submitted to the School of English, Irish, and Communication,
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Prof Helen Kelly-Holmes

Abstract

Learner autonomy is a vibrant field. Early interpretations of learner autonomy primarily emphasized the individual learner but have since evolved to understand the nature of the relationship between context and learner autonomy (Smith 2003; Palfreyman 2014; Sharmin 2024). Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the extent to which the Algerian English as a foreign language (EFL) context supports autonomy. Additionally, before COVID-19, Algerian EFL education was entirely face-to-face. However, the pandemic prompted a rapid transition to blended learning, altering the language learning context. This shift makes it important to assess how blended learning affects the overall language learning situation and the development of learner autonomy in the EFL Algerian context.

This study addresses these gaps and aims to develop a better understanding of the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment in the higher education context, the influence of their past learning experiences on the development of their autonomy, and how the implementation of blended learning as a result of COVID 19 has changed their learning culture and their autonomy development. Drawing on constructivist and interpretivist traditions, this study adopted the qualitative narrative approach to the collection and analysis of data. It utilized narrative frames, and semi-structured online interviews to collect data from a sample of thirty second-year master's students in a tertiary EFL program within the Department of English at Northern University, Algeria.

While literature relating to EFL in the Algerian context usually depicts Algerian learners as reluctant, lacking readiness and motivation to learn autonomously (Ghout-Khenoune 2018; Hadi 2018; Maouch and Arib 2021), this study indicates that learners' autonomous capacities to learn the English language have been largely overlooked. The analysis revealed that learners possess significant capacities for autonomy and actively engage in their English learning within the blended context. However, these autonomous behaviors appear to be profoundly shaped and conditioned by the language learning context. They have been stifled by the EFL learning culture in fully face-to-face learning and have become evident when the learning situation changes such as with the implementation of blended learning. This illustrates how blended learning can support autonomy by altering the traditional constraints in the learning culture.

These findings highlight the need for a re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches in the Algerian EFL context, advocating for an autonomy- supportive language learning culture that aligns with the affordances of blended learning. The present study also provides a springboard for designing context-sensitive strategies to enhance autonomy in similar contexts and emphasize potential directions for further research on learner autonomy, especially in exploring learners' capacities for autonomous learning in relation to context.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the content I present herein is the result of my investigation and that reference is made, where necessary, to all external sources.

Zahia Hitache

Dedication

To my beloved and precious son, *Aylan*
You are my greatest joy, the reason I push forward every day

To my father, *Mohand*
Your wisdom and strength have always been my source of inspiration. I am forever grateful
for all you have given me.

To my mother, *Houria*
Your love and sacrifices have shaped who I am. You are my heart and my forever role model.

To my loving husband, *Yanis*
You are my rock, and everything you have done for me goes beyond what words can ever
express.

To my sisters, *Kahina, Saida, Samia, and Souraya*
I am truly blessed to have you as my sisters. Your help and encouragement mean the world to
me.

To my brothers, *Yahia and Nassim*
You are the pillars of our family. Thanks for always being there.

To my sisters-in-law, *Miliza and Malika*
Your presence has added warmth to our family.

To all my wonderful nephews and nieces
You fill our family with joy. I am so proud of each one of you.

To all my cherished friends
Thank you for being my companions through thick and thin, always lifting me up. Your
friendship is a blessing.

Acknowledgment

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Special thanks to the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research for funding this research and to the Embassy of Algeria in Dublin for their constant help. This project would have never been fulfilled without your support.

The warmest thanks go to my husband, Yanis, for being the only person I could count on in the moments of loneliness and despair I experienced over the last four years. I acknowledge all the sacrifices you have had to make in support of me fulfilling my dreams. Thank you for believing in me and for the countless times you reminded me that I am a strong woman, and I can do it.

I am particularly thankful for my father and mother who raised me to value education and believed in my capacities to achieve my (our) dreams. I sincerely appreciate all your efforts to provide all that I need throughout my education journey. I extend other profound thanks to my sisters and brothers who always stood by my side during my hard times. I want also to thank all my friends and colleagues who supported me emotionally and academically during this PhD experience. Thank you very much for being there through all the ups and downs we have shared. Your friendship is priceless.

Finally, I am equally thankful to the Algerian EFL learners who gave their time to participate in this project. The stories you shared are so invaluable, and your contribution has enriched this research in countless ways.

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List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

ELT: English Language Teaching

SLTE: Second Language Teachers Education

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

CALL: Computer Assisted Language Learning

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

LMD: License- Master- Doctorate system

MESRS: Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique

BAC: Baccalaureate Exam

ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

CRAPEL: Centre de Recherche et d'Application Pédagogique en Langue

SNS: Social Networking Sites

Q&A: Questions and Answers

COVID-19: Corona Virus Disease of 2019

Moodle: Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment

LMS: Learning Management System

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

TPACK: Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

AI: Artificial intelligence

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Chapter One: General Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Throughout its approximately forty-year history in language education, autonomy has received increasing attention, particularly concerning the affordability of digital technologies. These technologies are often attributed to enhancing learner autonomy and expanding access to learning opportunities by enabling learners to use digital learning resources in out-of-class contexts (Reinders et al. 2022). Moreover, for an insightful understanding of autonomy, recent research advocates for an extensive investigation of learners' experiences beyond traditional classroom environments (Chong and Reinders 2022), including those encountered in blended learning settings. Thus, it is imperative to understand the significance of learning environments that have an out-of-class learning component like blended learning in cultivating autonomy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The focus of this study, therefore, is on understanding how the use of blended learning in the Algerian EFL context encourages learner autonomy. I will briefly present in this chapter the contextual background of this research as well as its aims, questions, and significance.

1.2 The Research Context

This study was conducted within the Algerian educational environment, focusing particularly on the English language department at a University in Northern Algeria. The primary justification behind examining this specific context of Algeria stems from the inherent relatability between the experiences of the participants and my own background within a similar educational setting. This alignment has been underscored in the literature, as being close to participants is acknowledged for its facilitative role in eliciting high-quality qualitative data (Morrow 2005; Sikes and Potts 2008; Wellington, 2015). Furthermore, the prospect of my future employment within this context enhances the pertinence and applicability of this study's findings.

This section presents not only the physical place but also all the situational conditions in which this research was conducted starting with general background information on Algerian higher education, then the change that Algerian universities witnessed when shifting from classical to

Licence- master- doctorate system (LMD), and finally the University of Northern Algeria will be presented as the main investigated environment.

1.2.1 Algerian Higher Education

Since its independence in 1962, Algerian higher education has witnessed notable developments over the years. The number of higher education institutions has grown significantly from three establishments immediately following independence to a total of fifty-four universities, accommodating over 1.6 million students and employing more than 70,000 teaching staff for the academic year 2023/2024 as reported by the Algerian online news platform ALGERIE ECO (2023). While public universities are the most common type and are funded and administered by the government, there also exist private institutions that students have the option to enroll in. Furthermore, Algerian citizens who are enrolled in public universities do not pay any tuition fees and have access to many free-of-charge services such as meals, transportation, and accommodation. Besides, the Ministry of Higher Education provides all students with a small quarterly allowance. As for the admission to Algerian universities, it is conditioned to a successful completion of the Baccalaureate exam (BAC) which covers different subjects depending on the chosen discipline in secondary school. This exam also determines admission to a particular discipline at university. Students can choose their course of study to a certain extent, however, their performance in the BAC exam impacts their acceptance or rejection.

1.2.2 The Shift to the License- Master- Doctorate (LMD) System

The integration of the LMD (License - Master- doctorate) system represents a significant transformation within Algerian higher education. The classical system was primarily based on a long-duration curriculum leading to a single diploma. However, criticisms arose regarding its large groups, conventional teaching methods, and teacher-centeredness rendering it inappropriate to meet the requirements of the modern globalized world and the exigencies of the Algerian socio-economic context (Hadi 2018). Consequently, a reform agenda emerged, and the LMD system was proposed as an alternative meant to promote contemporary pedagogies and foster a culture of lifelong learning. Indeed, the LMD system was conceived as a key element of the Bologna Process initiated in 1999. The aim was to facilitate citizens' mobility and enhance employability across European countries by standardizing the different practices in higher education. Subsequently, several non-European countries, including Algeria, where the current study is situated, acceded to the process. The official adoption of the LMD system in Algeria occurred during the academic year 2004/2005, intending to revolutionize higher education. Nonetheless, like any transformative endeavor, this transition encountered

impediments and shortcomings, with universities lacking some human and material resources (Metatla 2016).

The transition from the traditional educational system to the LMD system within educational institutions in Algeria has significantly influenced both the structural framework and pedagogical approaches of higher education. Under the LMD system, the license degree, equivalent to a bachelor's degree, is obtained in three years instead of the classical four-year program. Similarly, a master's degree replaces Magister degree in addition to a doctorate degree which is introduced to the education system. Courses in the LMD system consist of a blend of optional lectures and mandatory tutorial workshops, as stipulated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS 2011). One of the fundamental aspects of the LMD system is the adoption of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which eases the allocation of credits to individual modules. The evaluation system predominantly emphasizes students' continuous engagement in everyday lectures in the classroom. This is complemented by some project work; however, in-class final examinations significantly shape final results (MESRS 2011). Pedagogically, the LMD system advocates for a learner-centered approach, positioning students as active participants within the learning environment, both within and beyond the confines of the classroom (Idri, 2012). It also seeks to promote research, connect students with the employment sector, and equip them with the necessary skills needed to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world and contribute effectively to national development (Bouhadiba 2013, Zitouni and Jaileb 2014). Ultimately, the overarching objective of the LMD system transition is to promote independent learners who can navigate the complexities of contemporary society autonomously.

1.2.3 The Northern University of Algeria

The University of Northern Algeria is a multidisciplinary public institution of higher education with approximately 45,000 students and 2941 staff members (1714 teachers and 1227 technical and administrative staff) distributed across eight faculties. These faculties include the Faculty of Technology, the Faculty of Exact Sciences, the Faculty of Natural and Life Sciences, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Economics, Management and Commercial Sciences, the Faculty of Arts and Languages, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Medicine.

This study took place in the Faculty of Arts and Languages, more precisely, at the Department of English which comprises undergraduate (License) and postgraduate (Master and Doctorate) programs. While preparing for the License degree, students are supposed to acquire language

skills as well as master grammar. Furthermore, they are exposed to research methodology with other fundamental content subjects such as linguistics, Anglo-Saxon civilization, and information and communication technologies (ICT). It is in the master cycle that students can specialize either in didactics, linguistics, or literature and civilization. To obtain the master's degree, students in the second year during the second semester, are given the option to either submit a dissertation and undergo a viva voce defense or engage in vocational training within various sectors of national education to gain practical experience and become teachers of English.

The Northern University was among the pioneering universities in Algeria to embrace the LMD project in 2004 (Idri 2012). Given its affiliation with the LMD initiative, educational practices at this university should ideally encourage autonomy. In this regard, exploring the perceptions of EFL learners regarding the characteristics of the Algerian EFL learning environment and their implications on learner profiles can prove beneficial for both this institution and similar educational establishments within the Algerian context.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The link between the use of modern technologies and increasing learners' control over their learning is well established in the literature (Benson 2007, 2011; Zhang and Wu 2009; Lai and Gu 2011; Lewis 2013; Rienties et al. 2018, Shadieff and Yang 2020), as is the potential contribution of blended learning and blended technologies in promoting greater autonomy in learners (Mirriahi et al. 2015; Tseng and Walsh 2016; Akbarov et al. 2018; Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour 2017; Liu 2013; Zhang and Zhu 2018). In Algeria, the absence of student-centered characteristics in the educational environment is becoming a significant concern that cannot be ignored. While research has explored learners' autonomous behaviors within traditional classrooms, their real practices beyond these settings, particularly in blended learning that gives learners opportunities for extended engagement remain underexplored. In this regard, Wong and Reinders (2022) advocate for extensive and broader investigations into learners' experiences beyond the classroom "to better capture both the lifelong and life-wide nature of autonomous learning" (p. 20). Regrettably, such inquiries remain missing within the Algerian educational environment. Furthermore, students' perceptions about the potential impact of their educational environment on the cultivation of autonomy have also been under-researched. My own experience as a student in this educational context has shown that some elements within this specific context, including some teaching practices, are discouraging autonomous learning.

There is a serious lack of practices that involve learners in the decision-making process, especially in terms of what and how to learn. The dominant practice was and still is, that teachers are responsible for most if not all aspects of learning, leaving no room for learners to decide on some aspects of their learning.

On the publishing side, there is indeed a paucity in Algeria on what learners can do in terms of taking charge of their learning when given opportunities to do so. However, the main focus of research was, and still is, on investigating learners' readiness to be involved in autonomous learning. Prevailing research predominantly focuses on assessing learners' readiness in isolation of the context where they learn. There have been limited attempts to gain an understanding of the whole context which is an important step to judge whether learners are given some opportunities to control some aspect of their learning and whether learners perceive the unique context of Algeria as favoring and encouraging autonomous practices. Investigating learners' autonomy in relation to context can help understand both the nature and quality of their language learning process and the defining characteristics of the whole learning context because learners are always seen in a context which in turn influences how they learn and exercise autonomy (Oxford 2003; Palfreyman 2014). As such, this can help find ways to enhance their autonomy (Lamb 2010).

1.4 The Objectives and Aims of the Study

This research seeks to achieve several interconnected aims. The main aim can be defined as investigating the impact of blended learning on the development of Algerian EFL learners' autonomy by considering critically learners' experiences and subjective narratives about their EFL learning in a blended context. The examination of learners' experiences is deemed instrumental in elucidating their engagement and interaction with the learning context, particularly regarding their ability to exercise autonomy when provided with the opportunity to do so. I approach this by exploring the different practices of learners in the EFL blended context. Furthermore, the study explores the elements influencing the development of autonomy among Algerian EFL learners. Specifically, it examines their past learning experiences and their culture of learning. The study also looks at how the integration of blended learning may bring change to the Algerian learning environment. This includes the affordances blended learning offers for developing learners' autonomy and changing some aspects of their culture of learning in relation to autonomy. In short, the study considered the unique experiences of Algerian EFL students within the blended context, focusing on the emotions and

language they use to describe their identities as blended learners, their attitudes toward learning English in such a context, and the actions they take to learn English in relation to autonomy. This study endeavors also to present authentic and first-hand insights concerning the defining characteristics and quality of EFL learning in the Algerian educational environment. Besides, this study portrays a genuine understanding of the Algerian EFL learners and their experiences when transitioning from traditional to blended context concerning autonomy. The data serves as a gateway to discovering ways to encourage greater autonomy within this context and as a valuable source of insights for different stakeholders.

At the contextual level, this study attempts to understand learner autonomy by revealing context-sensitive insights into the appropriateness of autonomy within the Algerian educational environment, as seen from the learners' perspectives. Specifically, it explores the degree to which students in this context experienced autonomous learning when learning English in a blended environment and the extent to which autonomy manifested and was reflected in their practices. It also investigates whether learners are aware of the elements in their educational culture hindering the development of their autonomy and if so, the ways they see blended learning change some of these elements.

Overall, the current study seeks to enrich the current body of literature on EFL learner autonomy and significantly contribute to understanding autonomy from an ecological perspective by providing an authentic account of the relationship between the use of blended learning and the development of learner autonomy from the learners' perspectives as well by offering fresh insights into the role educational culture and the context plays in shaping and defining autonomy in learners.

1.5 Research Questions

The current study seeks to address the subsequent research questions:

1. How do Algerian EFL learners perceive their experiences of blended learning?
 - 1.1. How do Algerian EFL learners perceive the blended learning model and blended technologies?
 - 1.2. How do Algerian EFL learners perceive the experience of learning English in a blended learning environment?
 - 1.3. Are there specific challenges related to the Algerian context that need to be considered in the implementation of blended learning?

- 1.4. To what extent do Algerian learners feel empowered to control and take responsibility for their own learning in a blended learning context?
2. How does blended learning influence the overall language learning environment and the development of EFL learner autonomy, particularly in relation to learners' practices, interactions, and affective factors?
3. To what extent does the culture of learning in the Algerian EFL context affect the development of learner autonomy?
 - 3.1. What specific elements do Algerian EFL learners identify as barriers to developing autonomy in their language learning process, and do these constraints shape their learning behaviors and practices?
4. How has the widespread use of blended technologies as a result of COVID-19 impacted Algerian EFL learning culture and the fostering of autonomy?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes significantly to the literature on foreign language learning and learner autonomy at different levels. Theoretically, its significance stems from the efforts made to offer context-sensitive insights into the ongoing debate surrounding learner autonomy, particularly the notions of its appropriateness/ inappropriateness within non-western and culturally diverse contexts (Littlewood 1999; Palfreyman and Smith 2003).

The findings of this study correspond to demands for more context-specific research on learner autonomy (O'Leary 2014; Wang, 2016) and have therefore emphasized the contextual and cultural dimensions of autonomy as important agenda items for exploring the process of learning the English language and the development of autonomy in different contexts. Hence, this research provides in-depth first-hand insights into Algerian EFL learners' experiences within an EFL blended learning environment concerning autonomy, a novel context requiring investigation. Additionally, building on the findings from various autonomy-related studies in the context under investigation which focus on exploring learners' autonomous abilities in isolation from the learning context, this study goes beyond merely exploring learners' readiness to embrace autonomous learning, but also the role of the learning context in fostering autonomy. It particularly draws attention to and highlights the different ways in which autonomy is experienced and shaped in two learning contexts, namely fully face-to-face and blended learning. Moreover, building on my belief that autonomy should be explored in relation to the

context and my own view of autonomy, (see section 2.11 for details) this study further illuminates Palfreyman's (2014) ecological metaphor that suggests that learners' interaction with their context determines how they exercise autonomy. By exploring these interactions, the study reveals previously unexplored characteristics and dimensions of a complex and multidimensional construct like autonomy in language learning in a context that has been unexplored. Last but not least, the study extends the discussion of autonomy beyond the classroom, aligning with recent research recommendations by Reinders and Wong (2022). It explores learners' perspectives on how such learning contexts enhance their learning experiences, emphasizing the importance of considering autonomy within broader educational contexts.

At a methodological level, Reinders and Wong (2022) argue that qualitative studies are uncommon within the language learning and learner autonomy field, therefore, by being informed by constructivist research tradition and by adopting a qualitative approach from research design to data analysis and interpretations, this study contributes significantly to research methodologies specifically to the field of qualitative research. The current study brings to the fore the potential of qualitative approaches in exploring language learning-related phenomena and learner autonomy. It, therefore, advances our understanding of research practices in this domain. Finally, a noteworthy contribution of this study lies perhaps in its validation of narrative frames as a strong qualitative tool. Narrative frames demonstrate promise in helping researchers to effectively capture the expected data and thus, enhancing the qualitative data analysis in terms of quality and depth.

In the context of Algeria where research on English language learning autonomy, particularly from learners' perspectives, is limited, this study's findings make a significant contribution to advancing knowledge on EFL learning in Algeria as well as to the field of learner autonomy. Such contribution derives from the fresh perspectives offered by this study on the development of learner autonomy among Algerian learners within a blended environment, a relatively new context in Algeria. In addition, this study sheds light on the characteristics of the Algerian socio-cultural language learning environment, which has been overlooked in previous research. Moreover, learners are significant sources of information concerning their own learning (Kohonen 2006; Lamb 2010), therefore, as the phenomenon under investigation was explored from their perspectives, the findings reveal embedded perceptions and views of their English language learning experiences in both traditional and blended contexts. Finally, this study's findings hold relevance for stakeholders and policymakers in Algeria, serving as a valuable

source of data to inform decision-making and policy development within this specific educational context.

1.7 Thesis Organization

The current thesis is structured into nine chapters, each dedicated to exploring specific dimensions of the research. Together, these chapters contribute to the overall coherence and depth of the study. The first Chapter has outlined the current study's boundaries by presenting its contextual background, research problem, aims, and objectives. It has also introduced research questions, significance, and a brief outline of the structure of the thesis. The second and third chapters review critically the existing literature on learner autonomy and blended learning respectively. They will discuss some of the theoretical frameworks that underpin the current study and highlight gaps in the literature that this research intends to address. Following this, the fourth chapter of this thesis will present the methodological and analytical frameworks adopted in this study. It will provide a description of the overall research design and research methods used to investigate the research problem and address the research questions, the use of interviews and narrative frames for data collection, and the qualitative thematic approach for data analysis. It also provides details on the participants, qualities and limitations of the research design as well as the ethical considerations. Chapters five, six, seven, and eight will analyze and present the main findings as well as interpret, contextualize, and theorize them to discover what Algerian EFL learners' reflections could reveal about their EFL learning experiences in the blended context. The interpretation and contextualization of the learners' reflections entails understanding them within the broader context of data collection and the existing body of literature. In each chapter one main theme will be presented and discussed. The fifth chapter will present the main findings related to learners' perceptions and attitudes toward EFL learning within the blended learning context. It will include an analysis of how learners describe their experiences and the factors influencing their attitudes, particularly in terms of how well they feel empowered to take responsibility for their learning. The sixth chapter will explore the development of learner autonomy in the blended context. It will examine both the observable and non-observable behaviors exhibited by learners while studying English in a blended context. It will also emphasize the role of blended technologies in fostering autonomous behaviors. The seventh chapter will shed light on the interplay between the Algerian culture of learning and the concept of learner autonomy. It will explain the extent to which the educational culture shapes learners' autonomy and the overall EFL

learning environment. The last chapter will summarize the key findings of the study, discuss their implications for both theory and practice, present research limitations, and provide recommendations to promote an autonomous supportive learning environment and to enhance learners' experiences in Algerian EFL education. It will also suggest some directions for further research in the context under study and tease out the contributions to knowledge.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have briefly presented a general overview of the research context where this study was conducted, outlined the primary aims and objectives of this research, and defined the guiding questions. Furthermore, I have also highlighted the significance and importance of this research by emphasizing why this investigation takes place. In the following chapter, I will critically review the relevant literature on learner autonomy and provide a theoretical foundation that will inform the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Chapter Two: Mapping the Field of Learner Autonomy in Language Education – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The field of English language teaching and learning, formally established in the mid-20th century, has witnessed significant developments since then. Traditional teacher-centered approaches have fallen short of meeting the demands of today's society which requires independent and responsible individuals who can link education and real-life situations. As a result, the focus has shifted towards learner-centered approaches that favor autonomy and independence in language learning, as well as towards person-centered or holistic approaches, which focus on the development of the whole individual, including their emotional, social, and intellectual growth.

The chapter in hand reviews key areas of literature on learner autonomy in the context of language learning, shedding light on the main topics that are discussed. It begins with a brief reference to the origins of autonomy and its rise in education, particularly in the field of language learning. The chapter then explores how autonomy was conceptualized in the field by reviewing the various attempts by scholars to define the term. Following this, it briefly explains the versions from which the term learner autonomy has been interpreted as well as the levels of autonomy learners go through. Moreover, a discussion about the concepts of culture and culture of learning as factors that influence learner autonomy globally and in the specific EFL context of Algeria will be presented by reviewing a range of research studies conducted in different EFL/ESL settings. Following this, the chapter will discuss learner autonomy through an ecological lens as well as the theoretical framework that underpins the present study in relation to key foundations namely, humanistic psychology, constructivism, and the ecological metaphor of the learning environment (Palfreyman 2014).

2.2 A Brief History of Autonomy

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that the concept of autonomy did not initially emerge within the field of language education. Instead, its roots can be traced back to political philosophy, where it first appeared in ancient Greek society as an early manifestation of democracy; more precisely it describes the political status of conquered cities which is determined by their own laws rather than those of their conquering force. Hence, the etymology of autonomy derives from the ancient Greek word *auto* which means self, and *nomos* means law/ rule referring to someone who lives by his / her own rule (Dang 2012).

Having its origins in politics, early philosophers like Aristotle and Socrates addressed the notion of citizens' right to self-governance, advocating for freedom from others' authority. Only later it was applied to individuals and the emphasis was on cultivating independent thinking and self-governing individuals who contribute actively and responsibly to society (Smith 2008; Benson 2011; Benson and Huang 2008; Benson and Voller 1997). "Self-mastery" and "self-determination" philosophies were grounds for developing the idea of personal autonomy. According to Aristotle and Plato, the important part of the human soul is the rational part, therefore, the ideal for humanity is self-efficiency and independence (Hadi 2012). That is the autonomous person for Kant is free from external influences and his/ her decisions and choices are his own. John Stuart Mill also supported the idea of autonomy by saying that:

A person whose desires and impulses are his own- are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture- is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own has no character, no more than a steam engine has a character.

(Mill 1956 cited in Holec 1981 p. 73).

According to the philosophical view of Mill, the desire of persons to do something should be their own. Furthermore, autonomy is important to the extent that it determines one's character. The person who depends on external factors is like a machine that functions with instructions. The concept of autonomy has developed in the modern period to include political and societal dimensions. More human rights are declared, and individuals are respected. As advocated by Holec (1981) the role of individuals has been changed from "Man as a product of his society" to "Man as the producer of his society" (p. 3). Accordingly, individuals' voices are heard and are the ones who make changes and contribute to the production of well-developed societies.

Although learner autonomy has its historical origins in philosophy and politics, the idea of developing oneself can also be noticed in the field of psychology, particularly in the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. While Maslow's theory of self-actualization emphasizes the innate human drive for personal growth (Maslow 1954), Rogers highlights the importance of self-directed learning as a part of the fully functioning person (Rogers, 1961). Accordingly, the human development goal is to reach "self-actualization" and "become a person" and people strive for health, individual identity, integrity, and autonomy. Therefore, effective learning is a result of uniquely individual experience which results in individual changes in behavior. From philosophy to politics and psychology, the concept of autonomy has developed through history to include many other fields such as education, especially language teaching and learning.

2.3 The Rise of Autonomy in Language Education

The concept of autonomy in learning is deeply related to both Western and Eastern thoughts. Eastern philosophy emphasized the importance of self-reliance in learning:

If you are in doubt, think it out by yourself. Do not depend on others for explanations. Suppose there was no one you could ask, should you stop learning?

Zhu Xi (1130-1200)

Similarly, in Western thoughts, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) highlighted the idea of self-acquisition of knowledge: "You cannot teach a man anything: you can only help him find it within himself". The two quotations illustrate the shared belief across both traditions that learners should pursue knowledge out of personal curiosity and intrinsic need. Instead of being provided with knowledge, learners should be guided to find it within themselves.

In the early 1970s, autonomy emerged as a key concept within the Council of Europe's modern languages project, designed to address the learning needs of adult emigrant workers, in response to the growing political interest in minority rights in Europe (Gremmo and Riley 1995). This initiative led to the establishment of the "Centre de Recherche et d'Application Pédagogique en Langue" (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy in France providing adults with opportunities to learn foreign languages in self-access language resource centers (Benson 2011). The teaching approaches developed in CRAPEL were influenced by adult self-directed learning philosophy which encourages individual freedom within society. As a result, learners were encouraged to self-direct and control their learning, developing lifelong learning and

acquiring some abilities that would help them have an active role in society. Autonomous language learning was often associated with those centers as they provide adult learners with access to a variety of resources and with a choice in terms of what, where, when, and how to learn. However, learners' development of autonomy cannot be guaranteed in self-access centers. Hence, the role of language advisor was introduced in many language centers, including at Nancy in the 1980s/ 1990s, to guide learners and foster self-directed learning in a more structured framework (Benson 2011). After the death of Yves Chalon who founded CRAPEL and was considered a pioneer of language learning autonomy, in 1972, Henri Holec took over the leadership of the center. As an attempt to conceptualize learner autonomy, Holec identified the need to choose a term that describes peoples' ability to take charge of their own learning, thus introducing the concept of autonomy into language education (Benson 2011). Besides, learner training which involved language learning strategy training and developing learners' self-awareness, was considered an effective means for promoting this capacity. Therefore, attempts to foster learner autonomy in the 1980s and 1990s centered on improving learners' ability to take control over their learning process. The focus was therefore on, the learner and his relationship with the learning process.

The concept of autonomy in language learning is closely linked to the communicative and task-based approaches to language education. Benson (2011, p. 56) noted that "research on autonomy in language learning shares some of its sources with the humanistic, communicative and task-based approaches to language education with which it has been closely allied". They both aim to develop autonomous learners. Furthermore, the emergence of autonomy in language learning during the late 1970s and 1980s was linked to a shift away from the behaviorist assumption and the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT). This rejection highlighted that learning should be seen as a process learners can do themselves rather than being done to them. Therefore, more active participation of the individuals in the learning process should take place (Gremmo and Riley 1995). Being active in the learning process entails more interaction between individuals and the social context, which led to a shift towards more communicative approaches to language teaching. In CLT the focus is on functional, structural, and communicative elements of language, therefore the tasks in language learning that involve real communication promote learning (Richard and Rogers 1986). Furthermore, on the one hand, in CLT learners take on active roles as negotiators, communicators, and seekers of knowledge rather than passively receiving information from teachers. On the other hand, teachers are not seen as an authority but rather as a guide, a facilitator, and a monitor.

All have contributed to placing learners at the center of the language classroom and shed light on learner autonomy. In the earlier literature on learner autonomy, Littlewood (1998) and Nunan (1996) argue that autonomy plays a vital role in second language acquisition, and it is considered not only a key objective of education but also a measuring criterion of effective teaching and learning (Benson and Huang 2008). Since then, autonomy has become one of the goals of the learning process.

2.4 Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Throughout the past four decades, learner autonomy has emerged as a key area of focus of foreign and second language learning research. Although many scholars in the field attempted different definitions of the concept, there are still some disagreements on which definition is the most suitable. Little (1991) argued that describing autonomy is a complex and challenging task because it has been influenced by many fields such as politics, philosophy, focus on learners, and the psychology of learning. However, since the objective behind this study is purely educational, a reference would be made to autonomy in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, according to Benson (2006), the difficulty in getting a consensus on the definition of learner autonomy is because it is viewed by scholars from different perspectives, some areas are still in an ongoing debate, especially about its conceptualization, also, these concepts have developed in many parts of the globe in different contexts and cultural backgrounds and have therefore been defined using different terminology. As such, from a pedagogical perspective, it may be more meaningful to focus on defining the behavior that represents autonomy (Reinders 2010). This will be the focus of the section to follow.

The first attempt to define learner autonomy was by Holec (1981) which is the most influential and the most frequently cited in the field of language learning (Benson 2006). According to Holec (1981):

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 his learning.

(p. 3)

Holec refers to autonomy as an inherent quality of learners, emphasizing that learner autonomy involves taking full responsibility for the various decisions concerning the learning process. This includes setting goals, determining the content and pace of learning, choosing methods and techniques, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and assessing progress (Holec 1981).

Although Holec explains how autonomy over learning can be exercised, some scholars disagree with this view. They argue that Holec's perspective overlooks the nature of the cognitive capabilities essential for effective self-management of learning (Benson 2011). This definition describes what the autonomous learner can do; it ignores the aspects that help him to do it.

Little (1991) also emphasized the need to take into account the psychological side of learners, arguing that:

Autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes but entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychology in relation to the process and content of his learning.

(p. 4)

Little's definition provides a new dimension to learner autonomy which was missing in Holec's definition, namely that of psychology. According to Benson (2011), this definition illustrates the cognitive process underlying efficient self-management learning such as attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge.

Benson and Voller (1997) view autonomy from a political perspective and define it as "the recognition of the rights of the learner within educational systems" (p. 29) they further added learner autonomy could be viewed as "redistribution of power among participants in the social process of education" (p. 2). This definition gives learners political rights in autonomous learning where they should be involved in the decision-making process.

In agreement with Holec's definition, Benson (2011) states that autonomy can be best defined as "the capacity to control one's own learning" (p. 58). The difference between Holec's and Benson's definitions is in the use of "capacity" rather than "ability" and the use of "control" rather than "take charge". According to Benson, control is preferred because it indicates the power to make choices and decisions. Three interdependent dimensions of control over learning can be distinguished: learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content, as described in Figure 1.

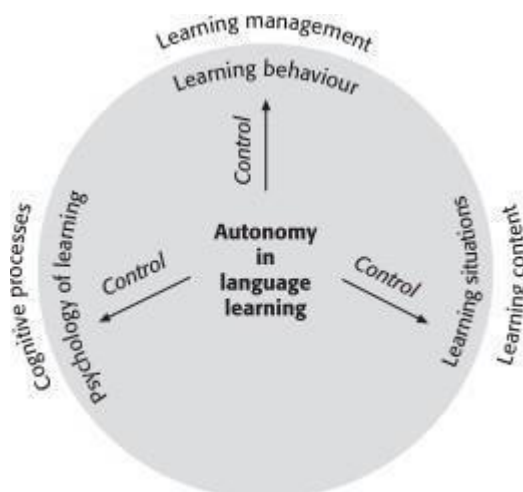


Figure 1: Benson's (2011) Definition of Autonomy: The Capacity to Take Control Over Learning

Learning management involves control over everyday practices like the when, where, and how of learning. Cognitive processes refer to control over how the language is acquired, focusing on the cognitive way of learning (how an individual learns a language). Learning content refers to what and how much of language is learned. Furthermore, the term capacity is favored because it highlights a person's potential rather than a fixed set of language behaviors (Benson 2011). It also entails that learners need to make learning personally relevant and adequate to their purposes and needs as well. Dang (2012) shares Benson's view and suggests that the terms "ability" and "take charge" should be replaced with "capacity" and "take responsibility" to better capture the essence of learner autonomy.

Morrison (2011 as cited in Jiafeng 2019) emphasizes the social aspect of autonomy, highlighting the importance of support from teachers or peers in the language learning process. Therefore, learner autonomy needs "Not to be a solitary experience but rather one in which the learners, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decision necessary to meet learners' needs" (p.14). As such, learner autonomy is the result of social interaction and collaboration with peers and teachers. As pointed out by Little (1994), the concept of learner autonomy should include the word "relatedness". Therefore, it is considered as "the product of interdependence rather than independence". (p. 3). In the same vein, Murray (2014) and Teng (2019) argue that learner autonomy should be viewed not only as learners' capacity but also as the outcome of interactions with others in their context. Additionally, in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory, individuals cannot be isolated from the sociocultural environment in which learning occurs as they learn and construct knowledge from each other through communication,

discussion, collaboration, and feedback.

Since learner autonomy is a much-debated concept and to prevent any misconceptions, researchers have focused on referring to what autonomy is not rather than to what autonomy is as a way of identifying its essence (Esch 1997; Little 1999). According to Esch (1997), there should be awareness while trying to define autonomy, especially concerning two main points. First, autonomy does not mean “a reduction to a set of skills” (p. 165) which means that autonomy does not refer to a process where learners are trained with some skills and techniques to acquire some autonomous abilities. Second, autonomy does not mean “learning in isolation” (p. 165). This view is echoed in Little’s statement that autonomy is the result of interdependence rather than independence. Furthermore, Little (1991) offers the following five points in his definition and states that:

Learner autonomy is not merely a matter of organization, does not entail an abdication of initiative and control on the part of the teacher, is not a teaching method, is not to be equated with single easily identified behaviour, and not a steady state attained by a happy band of privileged learners.

(pp. 3-4)

Therefore, we can say that autonomy does not follow a well-defined path to be achieved, does not mean learning in isolation and without the help of teachers, it is not something teachers can do to learners, it is a difficult concept to describe, and learners displaying different forms of autonomous behaviors can be classified in different degrees and stages.

My own understanding of autonomy, which forms the basis of the present investigation, is that it is not easy to describe autonomy solely in terms of learners’ attributes without considering the learning context. Autonomous behaviors in most cases are context-bound and their exhibition and inhibition are contextually determined. I discuss this view in greater detail in section 2.11 drawing on research findings cited throughout the thesis such as Benson (2011); Little (1991); Sinclair (1999); Teng (2019); Palfreyman (2014); Murray (2014).

2.5 Versions of Autonomy

All the attempts to conceptualize autonomy discussed so far fall under a particular view and this is referred to as “versions of autonomy”. Benson (1997) identified three distinct versions of learner autonomy: “technical” “psychological” and “political”. Oxford (2003) further added

the “social-cultural perspective” which she considers missing in Benson’s model and she describes it as “fragmentary” (p. 76).

Benson (1997) describes the technical version as “the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher” (p. 19). Accordingly, learners must develop some technical skills to be able to manage their own learning, including tasks such as the ones provided by Holec (1981), determining objectives, selecting methods, evaluating progress...etc. The focus in this version is on enabling learners to take charge of their learning without relying on teachers’ help. Second, the psychological version of autonomy refers to “a capacity, a construct of attitudes, and abilities that allow learners to take more responsibility for their own learning” (Benson 2001, p. 19). This version sheds light on how learners can do things. That is the cognitive, mental, and emotional processes and characteristics that enable learners to take control of their learning. It highlights how learners’ personal characteristics and attitudes can shape their ability to manage their learning. Building on Benson’s psychological dimension, Oxford (2003) proposed a social-cultural perspective on learner autonomy. In contrast to the previous versions, autonomy is considered to be based not so much on learners’ independence in decision-making but on the sociocultural context in which they interact and learn. The socio-cultural environment offers learners support, cultural insights, practice opportunities, and strategies to develop self-regulation, allowing them to participate and engage in their learning. This version is central to the current study, as it asserts that the learning context is an essential factor that either hinders or encourages learners’ autonomy. Hence, the socio-cultural impact on the learning process can never be ignored. Learners make relationships and interactions with different elements that are part of the sociocultural context including their educational context. Harmer (2007) supported this view and argued that the educational culture in which a learner is situated affects their attitudes towards self-directed learning. This suggests that an autonomous learner is not “freed by” (Palfreyman 2014) the context but rather he/she interacts with his environment to exercise autonomy. The last version of learner autonomy is the political-critical perspective which originated from critical approaches to learning and emphasizes issues of learners’ access, control, power, and ideology in their community. The critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt school of philosophy which sees knowledge and power as connected (Benson 2011), suggesting that

knowledge reflects competing ideological interpretations of reality shaped by the interests of various social groups (Benson 1997). In this version, empowering learners to take control over the processes and content of their learning is of paramount importance. Each of these versions technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical emphasizes different perspectives on autonomy and highlights the multidimensionality of the concept. As we move forward, it becomes essential to look at autonomy in terms of the different levels or stages of development. This will be the focus of the section to follow.

These versions of autonomy can be summarized in the following figure.

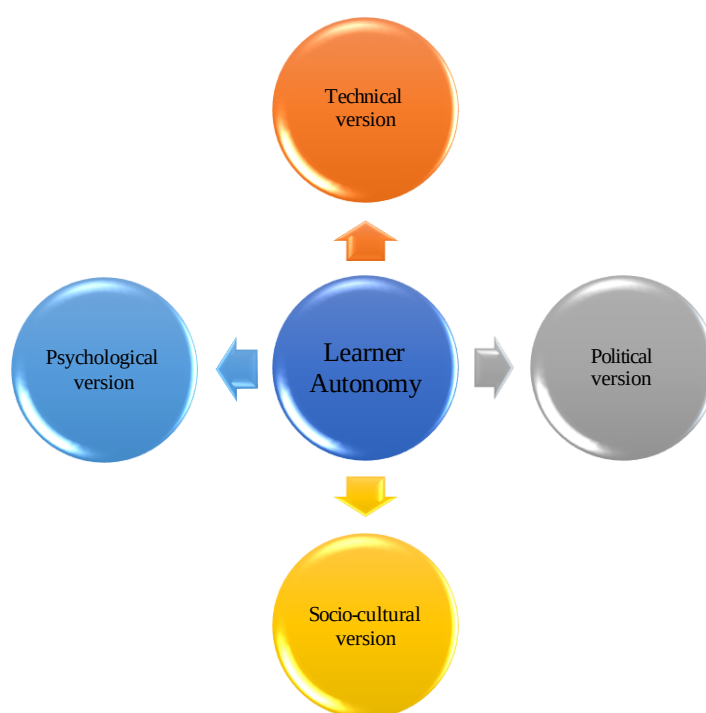


Figure 2: Versions of Autonomy

2.6 Levels of Autonomy

Although the concept of learner autonomy remains open to debate, scholars generally agree that autonomy exists in varying degrees (Benson 2007; Nunan 1997). In this view, the process of becoming autonomous is a continuum in which learners go through different stages to achieve autonomy. However, as the practice and development of autonomy are usually

influenced and controlled by different factors and variables, achieving complete autonomy is an idealistic goal (Benson and Lor 1998; Little 1991; Sinclair 2000).

Nunan (1997) sets out a model proposing five progressive levels for encouraging learner autonomy, each reflecting a specific degree of independence and ranging from low to high. They are summarized in the following diagram:

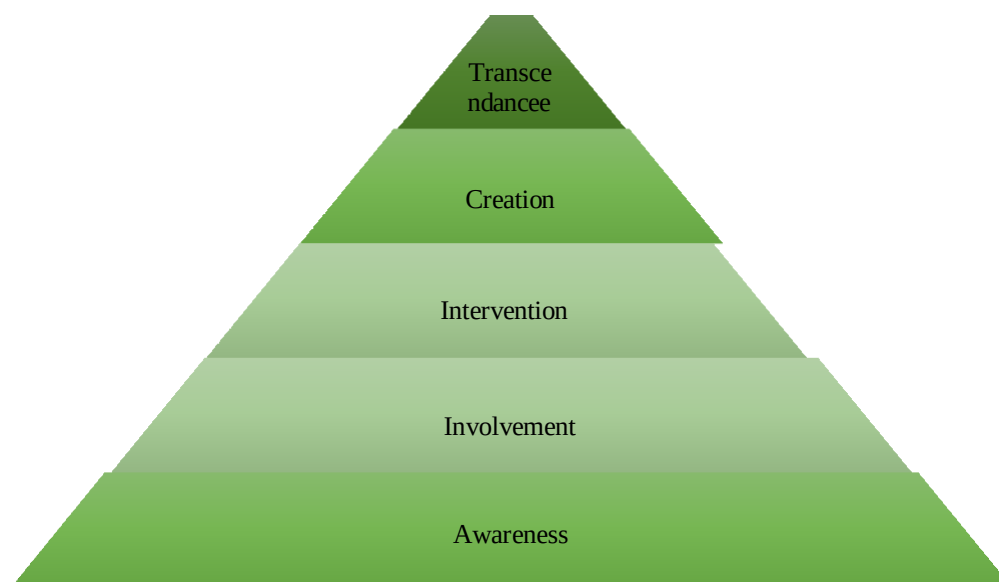


Figure 3: Nunan's (1997) Model of Levels of Autonomy

At the initial stage of awareness, learners must be aware of the learning styles and the strategies available to help them accomplish their tasks. They can be actively involved as they can decide the learning objectives and content. At the involvement and intervention stages, learners can select, modify, adapt, and choose the activities that are to be practiced in the classroom, and they have also some control over selecting their own learning paths and objectives. At the creation stage, learners can set their own goals and take on more responsibility. Finally, learners' levels of autonomy can be developed to higher degrees in the transcendence stage in which they can use their autonomous abilities beyond the classroom. They are able to assume roles as teachers and researchers, overseeing and taking full responsibility for their own learning. However, Nunan notices that the development of autonomy is a nonlinear process. Learners may be less autonomous in some tasks and more autonomous in other tasks. Therefore, the degrees of autonomy depend on the degree of control learners generate in their own learning. This model refers to the important role a teacher has in helping learners become autonomous. Teachers should encourage autonomy in learners by raising their awareness of key aspects of the learning process and by helping them identify their learning strategies and styles, thereby making learning more suitable for them.

Littlewood (1996, pp. 426-431) proposes another model where he distinguishes between three levels of autonomy that learners may have: autonomy as a communicator, autonomy as a learner, and autonomy as a person. The table below summarizes these stages.

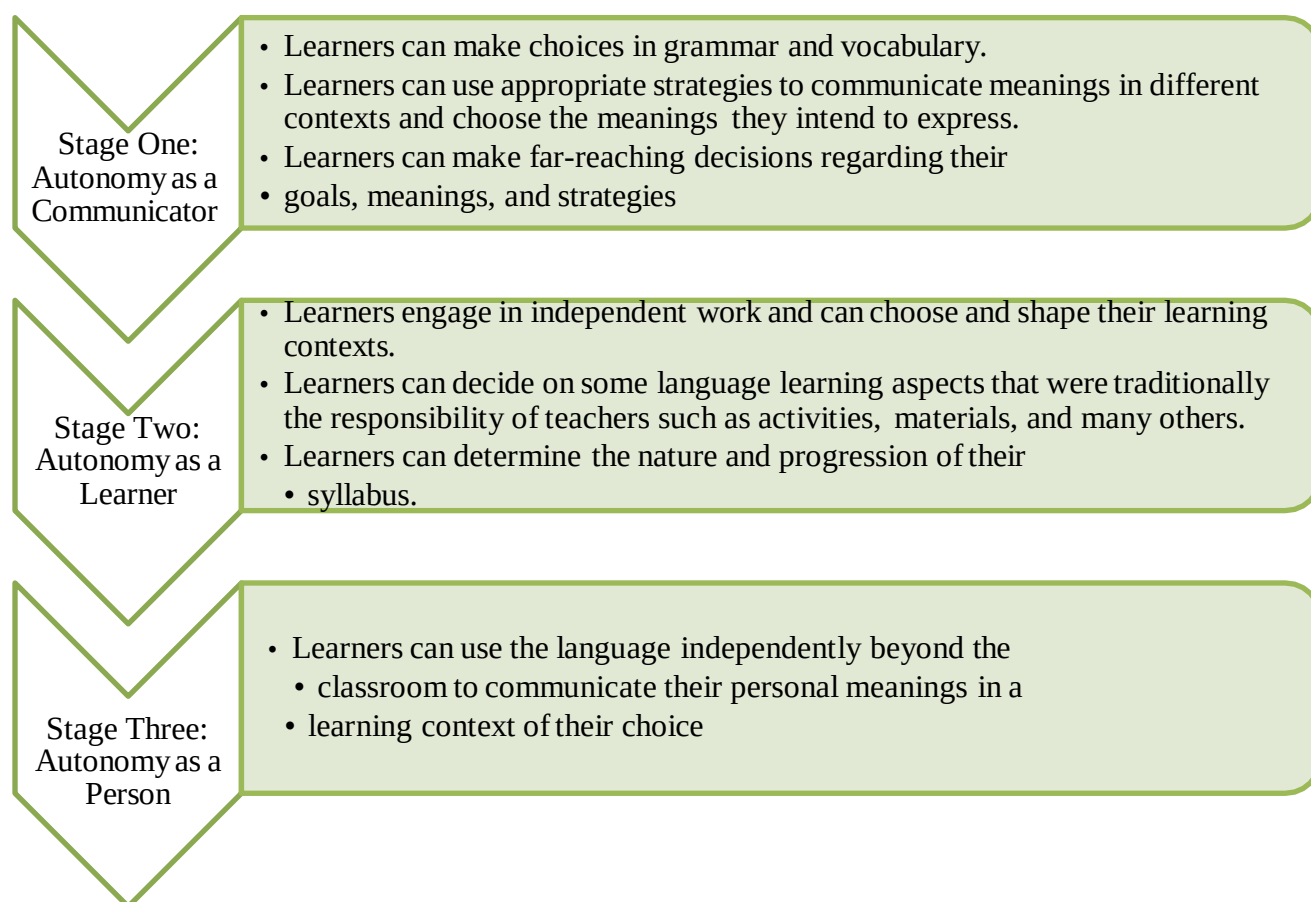


Figure 4: Littlewood's (1996) Model of Levels of Autonomy

Learners develop their autonomy by transitioning from making basic choices that impact the actions they perform in a specific task to more advanced choices that influence how the task will be completed. Learners, for example, may move from independently selecting aspects of grammar and vocabulary to making decisions about material use, learning tasks, and meaningful strategy use inside and outside the classroom.

Littlewood (1999, p. 75) further proposes a distinction between two levels of autonomy which he calls proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy involves situations in which learners take full control of their learning by regulating the direction of a specific activity and the activity itself. Learners in such situations define content, set objectives, choose appropriate methods and techniques, and evaluate their progress. In contrast, reactive autonomy refers to

situations in which learners take charge of their learning and self-regulate a specific activity only after the direction has been determined. That is learners lack the capacity to independently identify their goals and the direction of their learning but once the latter has been set by the teacher, they can autonomously manage resources and efforts to reach the predefined goals.

Littlewood notes that reactive autonomy can be a precondition for proactive autonomy. Therefore, reactive autonomy can be the kind that fits less autonomous learners to help them achieve proactive autonomy.

The third model is proposed by Scharle and Szako (2000 cited in Xhaferi and Xhaferi, 2011) which consists of three stages: raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. At the first level, learners use the cognitive awareness that enables them to be conscious about the learning process mainly defining objectives, selecting content, and determining progress. The changing attitudes stage refers to the situations in which learners change their learning behavior in some innovative way. The final stage, changing roles, refers to the highest level of autonomy where learners take greater responsibility for their learning without greater help or support from others. At this stage, the learners take full control of their learning. This model can be used as a guide for teachers' practice to develop learners' autonomy.

It seems that the above-mentioned models share some features such as the idea that promoting autonomy is a *process* that consists of different stages passing from low to high levels. That is the language learner can only achieve autonomy by attaining it gradually over some levels or stages. Also, any intervention to promote autonomy amongst students who are familiar with passivity rather than autonomy should consider these models by being aware of the stages that any intervention should go with. For instance, we cannot give passive learners the responsibility of defining content, methods, and goals. They need to first be aware of their personal learning strategies and styles, and their individual needs as well.

For the purpose of the present study, levels of autonomy exhibited by learners in the blended context will be investigated by closely exploring EFL learners' experiences in terms of the kind of control they exercised over their learning, their level of awareness of what is available to them, and the different ways they navigated their learning.

2.7 Characteristics of an Autonomous Language Learner

An autonomous learner is said to have some particular characteristics when compared to other learners (Benson 2001; Little 1999). Benson (2001) describes the autonomous learner as one

who is aware of their needs, determines their own learning objectives, and takes control over what, when, and how to learn. Also, such a learner can learn and use the language both within and beyond the classroom environment. Similarly, Little (1991) describes autonomous learners as individuals who actively take charge of their learning and make decisions that govern all aspects of their learning. They demonstrate an awareness of their learning strategies and styles and have a willingness to take responsibility and control over their learning. Therefore, awareness is among the essential characteristics of autonomous learners. Language awareness can be defined as explicit theoretical knowledge about the nature of language, as well as a conscious understanding, perception, and sensitivity in language learning, and language use (Çakici 2015). Learners need to be consciously aware of what they need for effective language learning including, strategies, learning styles, materials, interactions, and many others.

According to Breen and Man (1997 cited in Benson 2011), the characteristics of an autonomous learner can be listed as follows:

- See their relationship to what is to be learned, to how they will learn, and the resources available as one which they are in charge or control.
- Are in an authentic relationship with the language they are learning and have a genuine desire to learn that particular language.
- Have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or assumed negative assessments of themselves or their work.
- Are able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what they next need to do an experience.
- Are alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful, and opportunistic way.
- Have a capacity to learn that is independent of the educational processes in which they are engaged.
- Are able to make use of the environment that find themselves in strategically.
- Are able to negotiate between the strategic meeting of their own needs and responding to the needs and desires of other group members.

(pp. 117-118)

All the characteristics mentioned above tackle two main areas: learners' ability, which means autonomous learners need some skills to be capable of performing some roles. Second, autonomous learners are characterized by some psychological attitudes which facilitate the shift from dependence to independence such as willingness, self-motivation, and reflection upon the learning process. To conclude, the characteristics of autonomous learners may not be generalized, as there are varying degrees of autonomy, and not all learners demonstrate these characteristics at the same level. Learners at a certain level of autonomy can have some characteristics and not others. Furthermore, some individual differences such as motivation,

willingness, beliefs, and attitudes affect significantly the fostering of autonomy (Ushioda 2001; 2006; 2013; Dörnyei 2005)

2.8 Language Learning Strategies and Autonomy

Language learning strategy is an extensively researched area in second and foreign language education. However, given the word limit of the thesis, this section will briefly review language learning strategies and sharpen focus on their relationship with learner autonomy.

Much work has been done to identify some approaches, techniques, and strategies that could help learners become autonomous. Wang (2016) explains that researchers in the 1990s began to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and learner autonomy. This association was based on the assumption that these strategies can help learners manage their own learning, enhance their language skills, become self-directed, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and self-regulate their learning (p. 276). Oxford (1990) described learning strategies as:

Specific actions, taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.

(p. 8)

Simply, they refer to the techniques, goal-oriented and specific actions, ways, steps, behaviors, and mental processes that students often use to enhance their foreign or second language skills. Indeed, these strategies help learners internalize, retain, retrieve, or use a new language, thus they enhance understanding and facilitate the learning process (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990, 1996a 2017). To put it in another way, language learning strategies are the specific techniques and strategies that second and foreign language learners employ to make learning relevant and easy for them.

Many scholars have proposed different classifications for language learning strategies. However, the classification that is most widely used in the field is that of O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Their classification proposes three different strategies. Cognitive strategies are task-specific because learners use them to directly process tasks. Metacognitive strategies, in contrast, are concerned with the higher-order thinking processes that facilitate the application of cognitive strategies. They are not domain-specific strategies, and they are used by learners to direct their own learning. Social and affective strategies refer to the efforts learners make to improve their learning and complete their language learning tasks effectively. This includes interacting with teachers, peers, or other individuals in their learning context as well as

regulating their own feelings in learning. The table below illustrates this classification.

Metacognitive Strategies	- Advance organization - Advanced preparation - Organizational planning - Selective attention - Self-Monitoring - Self-Evaluation - Self-management	
Cognitive Strategies	- Resourcing - Grouping - Recombination - Imagery and auditory representation - Note-taking - Summarizing - Repetition - Deduction - Translation - Contextualization - Keyword method - Transfer - Inferencing	-
Social Affective strategies	- Cooperation - Question for clarification - Self-talk	-

Figure 5: O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) Maximal List of Learning Strategies (pp. 119-120)

Researchers investigated the strategies that successful language learners use to learn a second or foreign language, then, once these latter have been identified they can be made available for less successful learners through training. Therefore, it seems that language learning strategies are important in the language learning process and many researchers shed light on their impact on developing active language learners. Hardan (2013) argues that "Among the important things in the process of learning are "what" to use for learning "and "how" to use it" (p. 1713). Therefore, it is argued that autonomous language learners are those who use these strategies

appropriately and effectively for their learning purposes (Chamot 2004; Cohen 2014; Griffiths 2013; 2018; Littlewood 1996; Oxford 2003; 2017; Wenden 1991). In this regards, Wenden (1991) referred to strategic knowledge as the knowledge learners have about what strategies are, their usefulness, and how and when to use them and argued that it plays a vital role in processing and regulating one's own learning. Oxford (2017) further elaborates on this and regards language learning strategies as complex and dynamic actions selected and used by learners in specific situations to achieve their learning goals. Accordingly, they are flexible techniques tailored to learners' needs in different contexts.

As discussed above, it is assumed that there is a relationship between learning strategies use and learner autonomy. Wang (2016) argued that learning strategies are not just components of autonomy but also tools that help learners achieve it. Ding and Stapleton (2016) for example investigated the experiences of Chinese university learners when they transitioned to a new learning environment in Hong Kong. They focused on their strategy use and results showed that learners adopted different strategies to cope with the academic demands of their university. Results also indicated that the Chinese learners were able to develop their own strategic approaches to learning which has impacted positively their English language proficiency and autonomy. According to Ding and Stapleton, they have become confident and autonomous language learners.

While there was much focus on language learning strategy classification and use in earlier literature, attention has been shifted to the broader construct of self-regulation (Rose et al. 2018). Some researchers argue that the concept of self-regulation is more dynamic than learning strategy because it focuses on the strategic efforts learners make to manage their learning. It also defines the level of involvement and initiative learners take in actively participating in their own learning process (Dörnyei 2005). While learning strategies emphasize what specific techniques learners use to complete language tasks, self-regulation includes not only the use of these strategies but also the processes of planning, monitoring, and changing behaviors to achieve learning goals. Some researchers argue that although self-regulation is a valid construct, it is probably better viewed as an addition (Gao 2007; Grenfell and Macaro, 2007, Gu, 2012). Instead of viewing the two concepts as separate and competing frameworks, self-regulation should be seen as an additional layer that contributes to enhancing our understanding of how learners use strategies to learn language successfully. Acee, and Jung (2011, p. 47) support this complementary relationship by describing self-regulation as “both the glue and the engine that helps students manage their strategic learning”, highlighting that it

enables learners to effectively manage their strategy use. In this study, language learning strategies are considered important components in the broader self-regulation framework. The focus is on the different processes learners engage in when selecting, using, and adapting strategies to meet their needs and how this fosters their independence and self-regulation in their learning.

2.9 Language Learner Autonomy and Culture

2.9.1 Language Learner Autonomy and the Learners' Cultural Background

The widespread recognition of the importance of autonomy in language learning has led it to become a buzzword (Little 1991) and many studies have been conducted all over the world in an attempt to promote the concept. However, it is believed that it is important to consider the cultural context in any attempt to implement it. As Benson (2011) points out:

If autonomy takes different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts of learning, its manifestations are also liable to vary according to cultural context.

(p. 69)

Since autonomy is believed to have individual and social dimensions (Sinclair 2000), the socio-cultural context plays an important role in promoting it. Hence, issues about its appropriateness in different socio-cultural contexts have emerged. Therefore, among the key issues to consider is the relationship between culture and autonomy. That is to say, it is worth questioning if the cultural background of learners influences their ability to take responsibility and control their learning or if some other factors have a more significant impact. Is autonomy suitable for a group of learners in a given community and not in others? Riley (1988 cited in Benson 2011) was the first one to question the issues of autonomy and culture

- Are the autonomous practices ethnocentric based?
 - Is the predisposition for autonomous learning a characteristic of a particular social or ethnic group?

On the same note, Palfreyman and Smith (2003) highlight that culture has long been recognized as a crucial variable in relation to globalization and generalization of the concept of learner autonomy across various contexts. This opens the door for a hot debate on whether autonomy is suitable for all students irrespective of their cultural background. Two antagonist positions were witnessed. The first position is that autonomy is a Western concept that cannot be generalized to non-western contexts (Pennycook 1997) and the second position is that learner

autonomy is a universal concept that is valid, relevant, and effective in all cultures and a capacity that can be achieved by learners from different cultural backgrounds (Little 1999; Benson 2001; Sinclair 2000).

Several studies have been conducted so far to contribute to the ongoing discussions surrounding the cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy. Some of these studies have investigated the notion of cultural appropriateness of learner autonomy and the sociocultural context in which learning occurs (Littlewood 1999; Gieve and Clark 2005; Little 1999; Little 2007). Other research focused on the culture or habits of learning of students from various cultural backgrounds in relation to autonomy (Chan et al 2002; Ghout-Khenoune 2018; Ghout-Khenoune 2021).

Riley (cited in Schmenk 2005) answered his questions stated above claiming that based on his experience at the Nancy language center, “students of different nationalities displayed distinct patterns of readiness to work in the language resource centers” (p. 108). In this view, learning practices are related to some ethnic characteristics. Schmenk (2005) disagreed with Riley’s view about the relationship between learning and ethnicity, however, she is in favor of being cautious regarding the “potential ethnocentricity” of the notion of learner autonomy to avoid cultural blindness at two levels. First, neglecting the cultural identity of autonomy which is originally a Western concept is one form of cultural blindness. Second, neglecting the specific cultural backgrounds of a given society while trying to promote autonomy is another form of cultural blindness. That is to say that it is important to consider both the identity of autonomy as a concept and the identity of the community where autonomy is going to be promoted. In the same vein, Jones (1995 cited in Little 1999) expresses his worries about the applicability and the globalization of autonomy because the concept of autonomy when manifesting in social and educational contexts comes laden with Western values. He further added that “to make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least to culture insensitivity” (p. 28). In other words, autonomy is a Western phenomenon and its applications in education systems have been influenced by Western political and social values. Attempts to promote it elsewhere are one form of cultural insensitivity.

However, it is argued that autonomy is a concept that can be achieved and promoted in different cultural contexts and is a human right, a universal concept that can be achieved in many contexts. Evidence of this is found in Little’s (1999) statement that “the capacity for

autonomous behavior is universal even though the behavior itself will necessarily vary from place to place under the impact of particular sociocultural factors” (p. 28). Like any other human being’s capacities, autonomy can be achieved by all human beings, and it is one of their defining characteristics. Smith (2008) supports the view that learner autonomy can be promoted in various cultures saying:

There persists a tension, however, between pedagogical approaches which construe autonomy primarily as something learners lack and so need to be ‘trained towards’ and those which take as a starting point the idea that learners—of whatever background culture—are already able, at least to some degree, to exercise control over their own learning. Supportive engagement of learners’ existing autonomy (by the teacher) can be seen as an important basis for its progressive development.

(p. 396)

In Smith’s view, culture does not represent an obstacle to promoting autonomy and it is simply a question of degrees.

Littlewood’s (1999) study conducted in Hong Kong examined both Asian and European students who were enrolled in English language courses. A questionnaire was administered to explore the students’ perceptions of autonomous learning and reflect their ideas about the kind of learner they are. The participants came from different cultural backgrounds, eight came from Asian countries, and three from European countries. The findings indicated that although Asian students showed passive classroom behavior, they expressed a desire to become autonomous language learners, similar to their European peers, and demonstrated an awareness of their language learning needs. Therefore, the passivity of Asian students cannot be attributed to their ethnicity but rather to their learning environment which does not encourage autonomy.

In another study, Gieve and Clark (2005) explored how flexible learning approaches respond to contextual factors rather than being culturally predetermined concerning autonomy. Learners were asked to write reflections on self-directed and tandem learning and the responses of both Chinese students and European Erasmus students were compared. The findings revealed that Chinese students used autonomous learning opportunities just as effectively as European students. The authors suggested that given contextually appropriate opportunities, traditional learning approaches could change. This result supports the previous study by demonstrating that autonomy is not culturally predetermined.

Chan et al (2002) investigated the attitudes and behaviors of Hong Kong tertiary students regarding their autonomy, responsibilities, and decision-making abilities to gauge their

readiness for autonomous learning. A questionnaire was administered to five hundred and eight undergraduate students from various disciplines. The findings suggest that most students see teachers as having a very important role to the extent that choosing materials, evaluating the learning process, and defining content are exclusively the teachers' roles. Therefore, the writers concluded that in a context where the teacher is the dominant figure learners will adopt passive and independent roles. It would appear then that some students are not ready for autonomy because their culture views teachers as the only authority in the classroom. The authors further elaborated that students in certain Asian cultures may lack autonomous abilities because their culture of learning is characterized by memorization, attention to detail, and lack of critical thinking, therefore, they depend more on teachers.

Based on the studies discussed above, it seems that it is difficult to show support for one position over another. However, enough evidence exists to support the view that all learners regardless of their cultural background can act autonomously when they are provided with the appropriate learning situations that favor autonomy rather than passivity. That is, the culture of learning comes to the stage at this point. Learners of a particular context are not autonomous because some factors hinder them from being so. Therefore, the lack of readiness for autonomy might be explained in light of learners' previous language learning experiences and their context rather than their cultural traits (Ghout-Khenoune 2021). Furthermore, since autonomy is typically a Western concept and if learners from other cultural backgrounds cannot act autonomously, how is it possible for international students doing their studies in European universities to succeed in an autonomy-based environment? There are for instance African, Asian, and Arab students who achieved very satisfactory results in many European universities even though they grew up in different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, learners' autonomy behaviors are not culturally predetermined, and they are subject to change (Gieve and Clark 2005) when the learning environment changes. This change may involve teaching methodologies, assessment methods, learning modes and models, roles of both teachers and learners, etc.

As evident from the discussion above, learners can exercise autonomy regardless of ethnicity, provided that favorable conditions and appropriate support are in place. The reluctance of non-Western students to engage in autonomy-demanding tasks can be attributed to their specific culture of learning, which may not emphasize independence.

2.9.2 Cultures of Learning in Language Education

It seems that it is worth defining culture in the first place to be able to depict its meaning in

relation to learning which is referred to as “culture of learning”. Palfreyman (2003) argues that like autonomy, culture has no single definition, and it is viewed from different perspectives. However, one of the most agreed definitions of culture is:

The total shared way of life of given people, comprising their modes of thinking, acting, and feeling, which are expressed, for instance, in religion, law, language, art, and custom as well as in material products such as houses, clothes, and tools

(Kneller 1995 cited in Smith and Palfreyman 2003, p. 5).

The definition mentioned above summarizes what a culture involves. According to Palfreyman (2003), it constitutes an abstract way of life, shared by a community (given people). Culture also encompasses specific cultural practices, institutions (religion, language. etc.), and cultural artifacts (houses, clothes,). In short terms, culture refers to the daily practices of people their in everyday lives.

Similar to culture, when speaking about the daily practices, institutions, and artifacts of a community in relation to learning, the concept of “the culture of learning” and even more particularly the “culture of learning a language” is often used (Cortazzi and Jin 2013). Palfreyman (2003, p. 6) argues that based on Kneller’s definition of culture, the culture of learning involves the same defining characteristics of culture itself. These include the community within which the culture is shared (classroom, society ..etc.), the recognized learning practices in this community (going to lessons, diverse ways of practicing language), the roles assigned to the members of the community (teachers, students ..), the institutions that structure learning in the community (schools, language centers, self-access centers, families..), and the tools and products which members of the community can use to exercise different learning practices (computers, textbooks, students essays). In short, a culture of learning involves a group of people (students) sharing the same educational experiences and learning beliefs including for example assessment and testing methods and teaching methodology.

Jin and Cortazzi (2013) claim that the concept “culture of learning” represents the idea that “learning is cultural” and that “members of different cultural communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values, and beliefs about how to learn and how to teach” (p. 1). That is, the culture of learning differs from one community to another. The culture of learning of, say, a European community is constituted of specific learning habits different from that of, say, an Asian or African community. Furthermore, it includes “deeper presuppositions and values” (p.1) about the different ways of learning in terms of the roles of

both teachers and learners, the nature of language learning, and classroom interaction for example.

It is believed that one of the factors that determine learners' reactions toward the innovations of the educational system is the culture of learning. For instance, Jin and Cortazzi (2013) argue that the culture of learning influences the teaching/learning process in children being socialized in a particular culture of learning in primary school for example continues to have an effect throughout their study career. Furthermore, Prosser (1999) argues that each school/ educational institution creates its own unique culture of learning being characterized by specific values and beliefs that affect the guiding policies. Therefore, that specific culture of learning at X school for example determines their learners' attitudes and behaviors.

Due to the influence a culture of learning has on students, it is important to investigate learners' and teachers' cultural views of learning in many contexts because this enables researchers to determine "factors of success and failure when innovative ideas and methodologies are introduced in the educational system with the deep-seated desire of improving its effectiveness" (Gout-Khenoune 2021). Therefore, it is important to have an insight into the learners' previous learning habits and experiences to explain their attitudes and approaches to the language learning process. For instance, those who claim that autonomy cannot be generalized to all learners, often base their opinions on specific cultural characteristics of Asian learners, who are described as being passive, collectivist, dependent, and tend to accept others' authority and power (Littlewood 1999). In other words, according to the literature the characteristics mentioned above are typically related to Asians. Therefore, they are considered the defining characteristics of their culture of learning, which has impacted the Asian learners' participation in classroom interaction, lack of questioning, dependence on the teacher, and lack of autonomous behaviors (Littlewood 1999; Chan et al 2002; Gieve and Clark 2005). Another evidence of the influence a culture of learning may have on students is also shown in the study conducted by Kartal and Balçıkanlı (2019). It aims to investigate ELT student teachers' culture of learning and their readiness to become autonomous and promote their students' autonomy in Turkish contexts. Two questionnaires (a questionnaire about the culture of learning and another about learner autonomy readiness) were used with one hundred and ten fourth-year student teachers of English studying at school language teacher education (SLTE). Semi-structured interviews were used with twenty-three volunteer participants. Findings indicate that the participants come from a non-autonomy supportive environment. They studied in teacher-centered classrooms with very limited opportunities to practice autonomous abilities.

Moreover, the participants realize the importance of autonomy; however, they are not ready enough to promote learner autonomy among their future students. Based on the findings, the writers claim that there is an urgent need to foster learner autonomy among student teachers in SLTE programs to enable them to build up an autonomy-based culture of learning and transfer it to their future students. This study implies the fact that even teachers' culture of learning may also influence learners' culture of learning. Teachers who were familiar with traditional ways of learning that see teachers as the dominant figure of the learning process and all the decisions are their responsibility, seem to have some difficulty in accepting this change in roles. Furthermore, if teachers themselves are educated in a non-autonomous learning environment, the way in which they do their jobs will be affected. Finally, it could be said that the culture of learning of both learners and teachers may act as a barrier to the development of learner autonomy in a particular context.

However, how can an educational context be described as encouraging or discouraging autonomy? Existing literature suggests that the relationship between the culture of learning and the development of learner autonomy is a strong and meaningful one, but the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear, especially in the context under investigation. What is evident, though, is that learners themselves are the key to understanding this issue. Learners are an important source of knowledge, hence, investigating such issues from their perspectives would enhance our understanding. In light of this and in order to better describe the culture of learning in the context under study, the current investigation aims to explore the characteristics of the Algerian EFL learning environment by involving the learners themselves in this investigation and by taking into account their personal perspectives on various aspects of their language learning experiences. This includes how they perceive their language learning environment, the elements they see as encouraging or hindering their autonomy, what they perceive their roles and their teachers' roles to be in the learning process, different learning practices, assessment procedures, and so forth.

2.9.3 Autonomy and the Culture of Language Learning in Algeria

Some studies have discussed Algerian learners' autonomy in relation to their culture of learning. According to Benaissi and Fedj (2018), similar to the Asian culture of learning which is described as "collectivist", teachers are the only authority in the classroom, learners who discuss or contradict their teachers are described as disrespectful, learning is based on memorization and imitation, the Algerian learners are characterized by the same educational beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. That is to say that the above-mentioned characteristics are to

some extent applicable for Algerian learners. Additionally, they argued that “such beliefs and attitudes stem from notions like; collaboration, authority’s control, indirectness, and social status that are deeply rooted in the national cultural background” (p. 454). In other words, because Algerian students “progress in a culture of the group, the family, the community; decides with parents (family) and shares experiences with others” (Benaissi 2015, p. 412), their approach to learning is impacted in that they consider the teacher as someone necessary for learning and consult him before making decisions. Therefore, teachers’ authority and control are accepted to determine all their learning paths. Furthermore, indirectness means that learners do not express their needs freely because they are raised with the habit of respecting someone older and more knowledgeable than them. This makes Algerian learners passive, dependent, and not expressive of opinions (Benaissi and Fedj 2018). They further elaborate that social status is respected in the Algerian culture to the extent that if learners question the content of their learning, they may appear disrespectful to teachers who are in a powerful position. In short, learners’ acceptance of teachers’ authority is due to the effect of the Algerian culture of instruction and education. The Algerian society’s patriarchal structure which depends on parental authority has impacted learners’ perception of themselves and their teachers (Benaissi 2015).

In the context of this research, the Algerian environment seems to display some cultural characteristics that may impede the development of learner autonomy. Elements such as teachers’ authority, indirectness, collaboration, and social status can lead to uneasiness and reluctance toward autonomous learning. However, as Benaissi (2015) notes, it is certainly possible to identify strategies to cope with these contextual challenges. Furthermore, most of the studies mentioned above focused on autonomy within traditional learning environments, where face-to-face instruction predominates. There is a need for further explorations of learners’ perceptions and readiness for autonomy in different learning environments, particularly those like blended learning, where learners are given chances to exercise their autonomous abilities, control the pace of their learning, and make some decisions, especially in relation to when, where, and how to learn. Thus, the researcher’s vision in this study is that change in some aspect of the learners’ educational culture may impact positively their perception, readiness, and practices for autonomy because according to Ghout-Khenoune (2018), this lack of readiness for autonomy among EFL learners in Algerian higher education is not due to any inherent personal or cultural characteristic but rather to a lack of an autonomous supportive environment. To contribute to the debate about the inappropriateness of learner autonomy in non-western

contexts, Ghout-Khenoune (2021) investigated the existing EFL culture of learning at the Department of English at the University of Béjaïa, and the place of autonomy in this culture of learning. The aim is to infer the participants' culture of English language learning and to highlight evidence of their autonomous learning in this culture. Data revealed that learners are highly motivated and willing to take responsibility for their learning outside the classroom, and they reported their affordances and limitations in their learning context. However, they also showed their great dependency on teachers, especially inside the classroom. It is then suggested by Ghout-Khenoune (2021) that students learning culture including testing culture, institutional culture, and national culture shaped their perceptions about themselves as learners, their teachers' roles, and their readiness for autonomy. In other words, learners' passive attitudes in the classroom are due to their views about teachers' total authority which is considered as one of the cultures embedding autonomy. Algerian society's acceptance of power and authority, and being collectivist are cultural explanations of such views. Furthermore, in accordance with Benaissi's view, Ghout-Khenoune states that social status is highly respected in the local culture to the extent that learners do not have the right to question teachers' authoritarian status. Besides, based on the findings, the educational context in Algeria holds a quantitative conception of language in which learning and knowledge are acquired through memorization, reproduction, and repetition. This view seems to influence learners' behaviors and their autonomy because it is believed that qualitative perceptions about the nature of language learning and evaluation are more likely to be prepared for learner autonomy (Benson et al. cited in Ghout-Khenoune 2021). Finally, she rejected the idea that learners from non-western backgrounds are inherently incapable of developing their autonomy, arguing that autonomy is a universal concept compatible with different cultures.

Ghout-Khenoune (2019) posed the following question "Is there a place for learner autonomy in the Algerian EFL learning culture? (p.10). Based on her study findings, she stated that:

There is no doubt, that the seeds of autonomy were there, they only needed fertile soil to grow and flourish. Evidently, this is dependent on the creation of an ecologically valid context in which space is provided for the development of an autonomous supportive environment.

(p. 10)

That is, for autonomy to be promoted, some changes are to be made in the local context first to meet the autonomous learning principles. Shmenck (2005) suggested the glocalization of autonomy rather than globalization. Glocalization means that there should be a dialogue between applied linguists and educators to negotiate "what an education for autonomy could

mean under specific local conditions and in particular, personal, institutional, social and cultural environments” (p. 116). Autonomy should be discussed with respect to diverse local environments because these latter may change the way in which autonomy should be promoted. Education that promotes autonomy should take into consideration the local specificities of a given community and more particularly the cultural side of learning.

Although few studies have been done on the Algerian culture of learning in relation to autonomy, the studies mentioned above open the window to understanding the culture of English language learning in the specific context of Algeria. EFL Algerian learners’ perceptions and beliefs of their teachers and themselves are impacted by their past learning experiences in the learning context, which is traditional, teacher-dominated, authority-oriented, and learning by memorization. Furthermore, classroom instruction is oriented by textbooks which may affect learners’ autonomy. Chettoune (2019) argues that:

On the one hand, the concept of autonomy in learning is first and foremost about freedom in what and how to learn. On the other hand, one should ask how can this freedom exist in an environment governed by rules, teaching methods, and syllabi to follow.

(par. 7)

Despite the fact that some limitations are present in the specific context of Algeria which can be a hindrance for students to adopt autonomous abilities and can discourage learner autonomy, it is possible to adopt ways and strategies that cope with this specific context (Fedj and Benaissi 2018) because learners from different cultural backgrounds can create their own ways of being autonomous (Halliday 2003). Moreover, to prepare a fertile soil for autonomy “multi-agent” cultures and their preparedness for autonomy should be explored (Ghout-kenoune 2021). Participants from educational and socio-cultural contexts namely learners, teachers, administration, curriculum designers, and even families are to be explored. Finally, the idea of depicting the place of autonomy in Algeria is still in its early beginning because more research is needed, and some interventions should take place to make some changes in the Algerian culture of learning and encourage autonomy. Therefore, the theoretical framework adopted in this study, which sees autonomy from an ecological perspective will guide my research approach. The focus will be on investigating how the affordances of the new learning environment -blended learning- create opportunities for learners to practice their autonomous behaviors, especially in terms of using resources. Palfreyman (2014) argued that one approach to foster learner autonomy is to raise learners’ awareness of the resources available to help them

in their learning. Being a blended language learner gives Algerian learners access to a wide range of resources either inside or outside the classroom. my aim in this study is to investigate learners' interaction with these resources and their impact on learners' perceptions and readiness for autonomous learning.

2.10 Rethinking Language Learner Autonomy through an Ecological Lens

Metaphors are more than just linguistic expressions; they shape our interpretation and understanding of the world. According to Palfreyman (2014), both novices and experts use metaphors as they guide thinking, direct attention, and open windows to build knowledge in different areas. Understanding human activity using the ecological metaphor has gained prominence since the 1980s. Ecology is described as the study of relationships among elements in a particular environment (Van Lier 2010). In the context of language learning and autonomy, the use of the metaphor of ecology is particularly powerful as it raises our awareness and encourages a perception of language learning as a dynamic and ongoing system rather than a straightforward linear process (Palfreyman 2014).

Through the lens of an ecological approach, the language learning process is seen as a network of interdependencies that involves actions and activities of both teachers and learners, interactions, language use, and many others (Sharmin 2024). To illustrate this interconnectedness, Palfreyman (2014) referred to the interactions and relationships that happen among elements in a natural or cultivated ecology:

A fish in a pond eats insects and plants, which feed on nutrients in and around the water and make use of oxygen and nitrogen liberated from organic detritus by bacteria which live in the pond, the fish and detritus are also a source of food for predators, insects and so on.

(p.1)

The natural ecology is a system containing interdependent organisms that feed off each other and compete with each other. Similarly, in the learning process, various interdependent elements interact all together to sustain the systems' overall function (Palfreyman 2014). This system includes learners, teachers, materials, resources, and different contexts. A key characteristic of the ecological approach is interdependence (Van Lier 2010; Sharmin 2024). This means that, much like organisms in an ecosystem, the elements within the language learning network are interrelated. A change in or development of one element has a significant

impact on the rest. Therefore, a holistic perspective should be accommodated to understand language learning and learner autonomy, as learners are always in context (Palfreyman 2006; 2014). Understanding how context influences learners, their perceptions, and actions as well as how context changes with changing activities, approaches, and conditions is of paramount importance.

In light of this, to better understand the ecological approach to language learning and autonomy, Palfreyman (2006) put forward the framework of resources. The learning environment provides a wide range of resources which can be categorized as material resources like books, computers, the internet, handouts, or social resources including a member of a family who has some knowledge about the subject matter, a friend, or a teacher. However, simply having these resources in the learning environment does not ensure enhanced language learning and learner autonomy, it is the learners' interaction and engagement with these resources that provides improvement. This interaction is determined by various factors. When speaking about learners' interaction with the opportunities available to them in their learning environment, the notion of affordance comes to the fore. The concept of affordances has become central in discussions about both traditional and technological resources in language learning literature and it is placed within the ecological perspective of language learning (Van Lier 2004; 2010; Palfreyman 2006; 2014). They are defined as action possibilities "available in the environment to an individual, independent of the individual's ability to perceive them" (McGrenere and Ho 2000, p. 179). Affordances are opportunities for actions or interactions that are available for an individual in the environment. Van Lier (2004) argues that affordances in language learning are the first level of language awareness with which learners can establish a direct relationship with the learning environment. For example, technology provides access to different books, articles, videos, tutorials, and so forth. The usefulness of technology to a specific learner in a given situation depends on many factors including learners' awareness and skills in identifying and using the resource, their affective factors in using the resource, and the availability of means to access the resource. Palfreyman (2014) argues that the factors influencing learners' ability to benefit from the affordances available to them interact with each other. In the case of technology as an affordance, a learner who might have some difficulties in writing an academic essay would write an email to his teacher or simply ask a friend for some guidance. The learner in this case used a material resource (Gmail) to have access to a social resource (teacher or friends). Without the technology (the skills and awareness to use it), teachers and friends would not be a resource and would not be accessible. This short example illustrates how the different types of resources

interact with each other and enhance learners' language learning process. Therefore, the language learning environment provides many opportunities for learners to interact, however, the key consideration here is the relevance of a particular affordance to an individual. Ziglari (2012) argued that the affordances should be relevant and applicable to the organism in question. In a natural ecology, there are two possible ways of determining the relevance of affordances:

In one sense, some affordances are naturally relevant as flowers to the bee or the rock near the river for a person to sit on; whereas in the case of other cultural or manufactured objects, it is the intended use of them that signifies the relevance.

(Ziglari, 2012, Important Scientific Research and Open Questions, par.1)

In the context of language learning and autonomy, learners play a crucial role in assessing the relevance of different resources. An autonomous learner evaluates the usefulness of an affordance and makes strategic and deliberate efforts "to float, swim, and navigate to some extent according to his/her own purposes" (Palfreyman 2014, p. 5). Such learners are aware of their learning needs and selectively choose resources that align with their goals. This particular aspect of autonomy, learners' intentional use of resources, will be explained in the coming paragraph.

From this perspective, learner autonomy is defined as "a capacity for intentional use in the context of a range of interacting resources towards learning goals" (Palfreyman 2014, p. 4). This definition sheds light on three important elements of autonomous learning. First, intentional use entails that learners' actions are informed, strategic, volitional, and non-determined. Learners interact independently and purposefully with their environment by being aware of the resources that are available to them. Palfreyman (2006) argues that this awareness is a basis for the application of cognitive, social, and affective learning strategies. Therefore, learners' actions are not determined, yet they act independently, use resources, and navigate independently according to their goals. The second important aspect of the definition is the range of interacting resources described above. According to Palfreyman, an autonomous learner makes use of these resources and decides whether they are relevant to his purposes or not. A learner who does not understand a grammatical aspect, for example, can make use of the different resources that are available and decide which one will facilitate the task for him. An autonomous learner will also make "effective use of these resources, be open to new affordances in his environment and be able to adapt to changing circumstances by seeking out new resources or adopting new ways of using them" (Palfreyman 2014, p. 5). Therefore, the awareness of availability becomes a determining aspect for learners. Once a learner can identify

a useful resource for him, he can make a plan for action to achieve his learning. Sharmin (2024) argues that from this perspective, the main characteristics of an autonomous learner are his ability to find materials that are available to him, use them effectively, and know how to be flexible to new elements in his contexts. Autonomy also supposes some sort of goals. Whether vague or modest, the learning goals provide direction for learners' experiences and impact their affective factors like motivation, desire, and willingness to be engaged in learning. According to Palfreyman (2014), language learning autonomy presumes two types of goals, linguistics such as being a fluent language speaker, or general life goals with a linguistic aspect like being an international businessman or working in an international company. He further explains that some societies influence individuals' choices of these goals, but an autonomous learner will choose his own goals and build an identity on his own.

The ecological perspective on learner autonomy emphasizes also how, for example, groups such as friends, classrooms, and families can demonstrate interdependent autonomy function as a learning system or a learning community (Palfreyman 2014; Sharmin 2024). In these communities, each member plays a specific role in fostering learning among other members by providing mutual support to each other. Palfreyman (2014) described a family as a learning system in which members engage in a continuous exchange of learning resources and support the development of individual autonomy:

Family seems to be supporting the learning and social agendas of its different members, with each member contributing and receiving learning resources in an ongoing exchange which on the whole seems to support individual autonomy rather than stifling it.

(p. 6)

This perspective highlights that being a part of a group does not stifle autonomy. Instead, interdependence within a community can encourage it. These communities create supportive environments that encourage learners to share, discuss, support each other, learn, and develop their autonomy while benefiting from the insights, experiences, and guidance of others. In such learning networks, autonomy develops through social interaction and collaborative learning (Vygotsky 1978; Little 1994, Teng 2019)

In short, the metaphor of ecology allows us to conceive language learning and learner autonomy differently by emphasizing the interdependence among teachers, learners, and various elements in the learning environment as well as the affordances that are accessible in the learning context. Therefore, this approach views learning as a dynamic process, characterized by a system of interacting and interrelated elements. Change in one part of the process triggers

corresponding changes in other parts.

2.11 The Approach in the Current Study

After reviewing the philosophical and theoretical aspects of learner autonomy within the language learning literature, I will now present my own perspective on the concept. Positioning any study with theories is crucial because it helps understand and explain the phenomenon under study. Two main theories have shaped my view of language learning autonomy, namely humanistic psychology and constructivism. Besides Palfreyman's metaphor of language learning has directed my perception of the language learning situation.

Humanistic psychology developed in the mid-1950s however, it expanded its influence throughout the 1970s. It emphasizes looking at the inner world of learners as a whole person and stresses concepts such as emotions, thoughts, motivation, and attitudes to language learning. Minghe and Yuan (2013) claimed that:

Learners should be treated as “a whole person” with both intellectual and emotional needs. Affective development keeps pace with intelligence development. So, neither the cognitive nor the affective has the last word, and indeed neither can be separated from the other.

(pp. 57- 58)

Therefore, both the affective and cognitive aspects are important. Humanistic psychology is believed to support autonomy because it pays attention to the learner's central place in the learning process, hence it encourages us to consider learners' personal identity, learners' affective feelings, and emotions including fear, worries, desires, and motivation as well as their personal needs. Therefore, it is essential to consider the learner's affective side in order to foster learner autonomy. When learners maintain positive attitudes towards their learning and are self-motivated, they are more likely able to overcome anxiety and be engaged to work independently.

Constructivism is a philosophy of learning that is believed to underpin the concept of autonomy because it considers learning as an active constructive process. In constructivist pedagogy, “all learning is active and not passive” (Erben et al. 2009, p. 63). Moreover, according to Thanasoulas (2000), constructivist theory sees that knowledge can only be constructed rather than taught. The construction of knowledge happens through reflection on our experiences. The most important view in this theory is that laid down by Vygotsky, namely “social constructivism”, which highlights the importance of the context in which learning takes place

(Vygotsky 1978). According to this view, learners construct knowledge through social interaction with teachers, and peers. This is illustrated by the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with the help of the surrounding context including more knowledgeable others such as teachers, and peers. In this view, learners cannot acquire skills and knowledge on their own but can do so with the help and guidance of teachers, peers, and the elements that are available in their learning context. This theory supports autonomy in the sense that social context provides learners with assistance, help, and strategies to cultivate independent skills and actively engage in the learning environment.

My view of autonomy is also shaped by the metaphor that Palfreyman brought into play “the metaphor of learning situation as an ecology” (2014). Viewing the learning process as an ecological system has shaped how I approach language learning autonomy research (See details in section 2.10). Autonomous language learners are seen through an ecological lens, as not independent and free from their context. Indeed, their interaction with their learning environment and context determines how they exercise autonomy. The process of language learning and the development of autonomy are bound to a particular learning situation or environment which could either encourage or hinder this development.

The interpretation of learner autonomy varies based on the degree and the extent to which learners are motivated and want to take charge of their own learning. Autonomy also depends on the affordances including tools, resources, and materials that are available in the educational environment and which learners make use of to overcome the difficulties they encounter during their learning process. As a researcher, it is difficult to support one single definition. Holec’s definition of learner autonomy is the most accepted “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. However, both learners and their learning context influence the process of taking charge/control over learning. Learner autonomy, therefore, depends on learners’ beliefs and metacognitive awareness regarding their language learning experiences as well as the opportunities that manifest in the learning environment. For this reason, I find it important to voice my own perception of learner autonomy and share my point of view as it shapes the interpretation of this study. For me, in addition to ability, learner autonomy should include the learner’s willingness and motivation to take charge of their own learning through interactions with their learning environment, specifically with the affordances that are available both in and outside the classroom. Furthermore, I do not view autonomy as necessarily an innate capacity or a skill that can be taught or learned, but rather as a capacity that can be fostered in learners,

who then choose whether to engage actively or passively in the process. The development of learner autonomy is also influenced by the learning environment because thinking of an autonomous learner as the one who “operates independently of classroom, teacher, or textbooks” (Nunan 1997, p. 193) could be a wrong and limited interpretation because it overlooks the role of the educational environment and its elements. Focusing solely on the individual learner when trying to interpret autonomy ignores important factors that can support its development. Therefore, as Palfreyman (2014) notes, the affordances that are available in the educational learning environment including materials, social resources (discussing with a friend, or a teacher) and the allocation of resources can all be facilitative features for the promotion of learner autonomy.

In the context of this research, EFL Algerian learners are described as passive and dependent on the teacher. Because of that, learners need to be stimulated and challenged in a variety of ways to become active and autonomous language learners. As stated earlier, some opportunities should be given to learners to take control, plan, decide, choose, and find out what strategies, methods, techniques, and even tools align with their preferences, learning styles, and abilities, as well as with their weaknesses. These opportunities are necessary and can support the promotion of autonomy in different educational environments. In this research specifically, because learning English as a foreign language is the focus, emphasis is placed on educational initiatives aimed at promoting the development of learner autonomy (Benson 2011, p. 124) and on how learners react to these initiatives. Consequently, learner autonomy in the current investigation is explored through examining learners’ language learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. The study focuses on learners’ perception of their roles, approaches, and practices when learning the English language, particularly, regarding their interaction with the affordances and resources that their educational environment provides.

The conceptualization of autonomy in language learning as “a capacity for intentional use in context of a range of interacting resources towards learning goals”, along with the language learning theories discussed and the ecological perspective on learner autonomy provides theoretical underpinning for this study. This framework shapes the evaluation of EFL Algerian learners’ autonomy development, informs decisions in the design of research tools, and provides conceptual foundations for analyzing and discussing the findings.

2.12 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some of the main discussions about learner autonomy in the field

of language teaching and learning emphasizing its origins, conceptualizations, versions, levels, characteristics, and cultural considerations. A key insight from this review is the importance of situating learner autonomy within specific contexts rather than broadly generalizing its appropriateness or inappropriateness across various cultures. The process of promoting autonomy is shaped by learners' cultures of learning. This means that instead of focusing only on the learners, it is essential to consider the various learning agents in a learning environment to determine ways in which learner autonomy can be effectively fostered.

Therefore, as we investigate learner autonomy there is a need to explore the limitations and the affordances inherent in a given learning environment to explain learners' behaviors and plan for initiatives to promote the concept in such a learning situation. While some educational contexts integrate principles of autonomous learning, some are still based on traditional teaching approaches that do not favor autonomy. This study will build on these perspectives to examine Algerian learners' behaviors, actions, and interactions with their context as well as the characteristics of the context itself, especially in terms of encouraging or stifling autonomy. Besides, it will explore how blended learning as a pedagogical model, can support the development of learner autonomy by creating opportunities for learners to change their learning habits and develop their autonomous abilities. By addressing the limitations of learners' learning culture and the potential of blended learning, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for fostering EFL autonomous language learning in Algeria.

Chapter Three: Current Trends and Insights in Blended language learning in Higher Education: A Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The recent integration of technology into teaching and learning practices has received significant attention in the literature. Since its emergence in the field of foreign language learning in the late 20th century, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), has long explored the integration of technology into language education. Early on, Levy (1997) has described CALL as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning. In the present era, CALL has reached its peak of development and influence. It has evolved from traditional drill-and- practice programs of the 1960s and 1970s to more recent manifestations which encompass a wide range of digital tools, virtual learning environments and web-based distance learning designed to support language learning (Benyo2020).

CALL has undergone rapid integrations and advances in the field, contributing to many attempts to create rich, multimodal and engaging learning environments. On this, Gruba and Hinkelman (2012) argued that these environments are active learning approaches that enhance the performance of foreign language learners. CALL has thus paved the way for many technology-enhanced pedagogical models, such as blended learning, where digital tools are no longer supplementary but integral to the learning process. Blended learning, being a model that considers technology a key enabler, stands out as a prominent approach. It is considered as one of the many active approaches that have emerged from the interplay between CALL and educational technology (Li 2022), combining digital learning approaches and face to face learning opportunities. Nguyen (2014) emphasized the potential of blended learning to improve the language learning process and autonomy, particularly in EFL contexts.

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature on blended learning, highlighting its impact on higher education especially, in the EFL language learning context in terms of innovating educational practices and improving learners' learning experiences. It first begins by tracing the origins of the concept, along with summarizing some of the attempts to define it. Following this, the potential advantages of blended learning will be discussed. Furthermore, different studies of practice will be reviewed, highlighting the relationship between blended learning and learner autonomy in EFL contexts. In the end, the culture of blended learning in

the Algerian EFL higher education context will subsequently be presented.

3.2 The History of Blended Learning in Higher Education

Traditional face-to-face instruction, where teachers and learners were physically present in the same space and time, was once the predominant teaching method (Wang 2022). However, with the increased integration of technology into education, some learning traditions have been affected and changed. In the 1990s, online learning emerged, and students used it to complete their studies remotely, without attending physical classrooms (Nortvig et al. 2018). Despite the initial belief that online learning would be widely accessible and economically appropriate, educators soon realized that it was not as effective as predicted (Schaber et al. 2010). This limitation arose because aside from being online, the learning process remained largely passive. Since face-to-face and online learning each offer different benefits, it has then been suggested that combining these different methods could improve the learning experience (Haijian et al. 2011). Therefore, a third method of instruction namely “blended learning” has emerged and is accepted among teachers and educators.

Historically, blended learning has its roots in the 1840s when Isaac Pitman introduced the first distance education in which he sent shorthand text via mail postcards to his students who were asked to send them back to be corrected and graded (Papas 2015). In the 1960s and 1970s, there was the introduction of computer-based training, allowing employees to complete their training programs using computers without the need to be physically present in the training sessions. Moreover, in the 1970s and 1980s, companies used TV-based technology especially videos to support live training. This method, which was an early version of today’s webinars and video conferencing, was described as interactive and engaging because employees were able to communicate with colleagues, watch the instructor on TV, and ask for guidance and help if needed by mail.

Stanford University adopted this type of training and used it for teaching and learning practices. With the use of a video network teachers were able to hold different classes regardless of their location. Moreover, learners were able to submit their work online rather than send it via mail or courier. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a more advanced use of blended learning, and institutions started to use CD ROMs to deliver content via videos and sounds. Therefore, this type of delivery contained a large amount of information and offered interactive learning experiences which can be described as the first attempt in e-learning history (Papas 2015).

As technology continued to develop, online and blended learning witnessed rapid growth, especially with the introduction of web-based instruction. Technological devices such as computers were not merely the property of organizations and institutions, but also individuals and families. Furthermore, computers were not only used for work-related activities but also for entertainment. Instead of distributing CD ROMs for individuals, institutions could upload a variety of materials including assignments, assessments, images, sounds, and videos on a web-based platform to which a great number of people could have access at any time and from anywhere.

The current era of blended learning commenced in the early 2000s. Blended learning has started to gain traction; organizations and learning institutions, especially higher education institutions, are beginning to use it. Due to the combination of the two methods of instruction face-to-face and online learning, learners now experience learning in different ways. They have access to webinars and online tutorials with greater flexibility of time and place. Furthermore, they can use a variety of technological tools that make their learning experience more engaging, interactive, and exciting at the same time. The visual summary (Singh, et al. 2021) below captures the timeline and growing demand for integrated blended learning approaches.

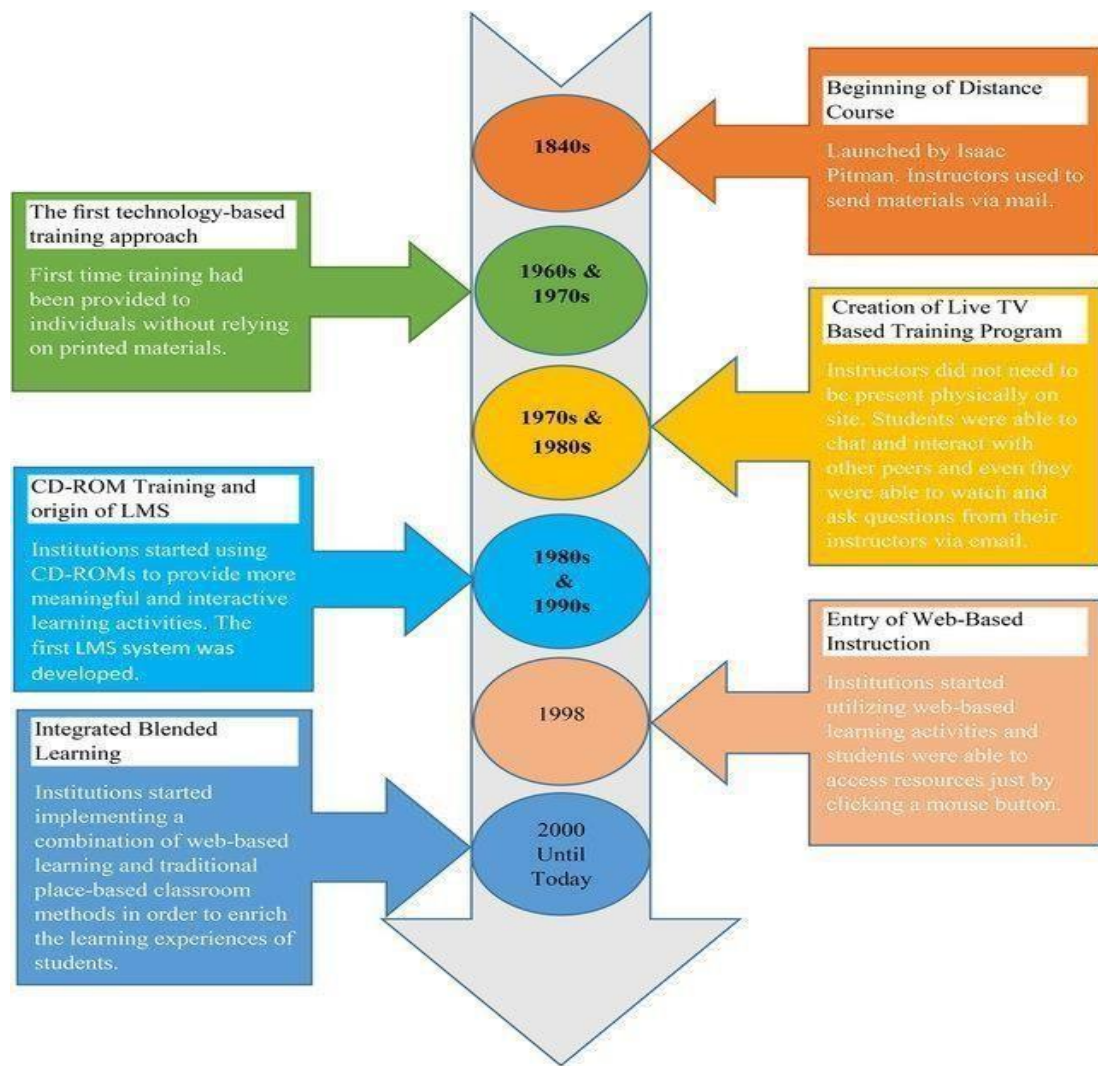


Figure 6: Singh et al.'s (2021) Summary of the Timeline of Blended Learning

Following the review of the historical development of blended learning, the next section will provide its definitions.

3.3 Definition of Blended Learning

Since the early 2000s, the blended learning approach has gained significant attention, especially in the higher education context (Halverson et al. 2017). Moreover, it has been predicted that it would reshape the future of education and would “emerge as the predominant model of the future—and to become far more common than either [online or face-to-face instruction] alone” (Watson 2008, p. 3). Some researchers explained that blended learning is an established concept in the field of education rather than a new development. For instance, Ju and Mei (2013) argue that it evolved from existing learning assumptions and beliefs and the combination of teaching methods. In the same vein, Sharma (2010) argues that blended learning was first

used by employers to facilitate their employees' training, then due to the interference of technology both inside and outside the classroom, it entered the field of education. Furthermore, due to the fact that online learning has been flawed in that learners encounter many challenges that they cannot overcome alone without the help of teachers, blended learning emerged as a solution. Many attempts have been made to define blended learning and several names are given to it. For instance, blended learning is referred to as "mixed mode" "hybrid or online supplemented" and "flipped classrooms" all of which emphasize the combination of online technologies with face-to-face instruction (Skrypnik et al. 2015). Boelens et al. (2015) describe blended learning as "learning that happens in an instructional context which is characterized by a deliberate combination of online and classroom-based interventions to instigate and support learning" (p. 5). In short, blended learning blends traditional classroom-based learning with technology- based learning, offering flexibility in time and location for education (Jones and Sharma, 2021; Clark and Post 2021). Torrisi-Steele (2011) describes blended learning as an:

Enriched, student-centered learning experience made possible by the harmonious integration of various strategies, achieved by combining face-to-face interaction with information and communication technology ICT

(p. 366).

This definition differs from the previously mentioned definition in that it specifies what blended learning constitutes. It sheds light on three main components which are a student- centered focus and an appropriate choice of teaching strategies and delivery tools. Similarly, Sharma (2010) states that blended learning refers to the combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching, and styles of learning that interact in a meaningful learning environment. Another significant definition is provided by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) in which they refer to the combination of face-to-face with distance delivery system and maximization of benefits of both delivery types. Moreover, they suggest three different blending models: a blend of face-to-face and online activities, a blend of students from the face-to-face classroom with those from the online learning environment, and finally, the blend of instructors where students can benefit from other instructors in the online learning environment other than those in the face-to-face learning environment. Therefore, as Beaver et al. (2014) refer to it, blended learning is an "umbrella term" that does not represent a monolithic wholesale approach to instruction; rather, it refers to several different models that blend traditional or technology-enriched classrooms with online instruction (p. 2). Kaur (2013) has brought into play a holistic perspective from which blended learning is seen as a way to deliver instruction either in a

traditional or online learning setting using multiple instructional media. Furthermore, Christensen et al. (2013) considered blended learning as a model that contributes to an integrated learning experience in a variety of ways and defined it as:

A formal education programme in which a student learns at least in part through online learning with some element of student control over time, place, path and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home. The modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

(p. 7)

Cronje (2020) flawed all the previous definitions for focusing on the blend of online and face-to-face instruction without paying much attention to the concept of learning itself. He argued that these definitions lack theoretical grounding and result in trial-and-error research. Based on this assumption, he proposed a definition that includes context, theory, methodology, and technology: “the appropriate use of a mix of theories, methods, and technologies to optimize learning in a given context” (Cronje 2020, p. 120).

According to Bernard et al. (2014), there is no consensus on a precise definition of blended learning; thus, for the purpose of the current study, blended learning will be conceptualized as a blend of traditional teaching with online learning activities using a mix of technologies and methods to enhance language learning in a given context and a learning approach that has some elements over which students can exercise some control such as time, place and path (Christensen et al. 2013). Therefore, given the exploratory nature of the present study and its aims to explore the relationship between blended learning and enhanced opportunities for effective English language learning as well as the development of autonomy from the learners' perspectives, this definition is to some extent appropriate for the context of this research.

3.4 The Potential of Blended Learning in Language Education

Blended learning is valued for its effectiveness in combining “the two modes of learning for the individual learning subjects, contexts, and objectives” (Neumier 2005, p. 164). Therefore, by combining the strengths of both face-to-face and online learning, blended learning has the potential to overcome the limitations of each approach and create a more effective language learning approach. Research cites several strengths of blended learning. Flexible scheduling and convenience are among the aspects that prompt students to choose blended learning (Watson and Gemin, 2009). Blended learning eliminates time and place barriers and offers flexibility in accessing information and resources (Huang 2021); hence, learners can learn

language synchronously or asynchronously (Kaur 2013); besides they can study anytime from anywhere (Ju and Mei 2018). Graham and Stein (2014) describe blended learning flexibility by saying “I can send an electronic message or post comments to a discussion forum whenever I want, and you can read and respond to that in your own time” (p. 19). This illustrates how language learning can still happen even with different schedules and availability. It is argued that since learners can learn at their own ease, time, and pace, they are more interested in their learning process (Ju and Mei 2018). Furthermore, this mixed instructional model allows easy access to language education. Remote learners have the chance to access learning regardless of any obstacle. Learners who are disabled, live in remote areas or simply have jobs cannot reach universities all the time. Therefore, this problem may be solved by introducing this method of delivery, as Swami Vivekanand suggests “If people cannot reach schools, schools should reach them”

Additionally, in some models of blended learning such as flipped classrooms, learners are required to access some materials online and get familiar with them, then in the onsite phase, time is given to discussion, interaction, communication, and collaboration. Therefore, the focus would be on the most important elements rather than all the lesson details. That is to say that learners who are already familiar with the content and material will not waste time for teachers in understanding the subject matter between hands. Moreover, teachers would spend “less time lecturing and more time guiding students and interacting with them” (McCarthy and Murphy 2010, p. 67). Accordingly, the onsite time is certainly reduced and the focus in most of the blended learning models is on the online phase. Therefore learners “would be able to complete programs in less time” (McCarthy and Murphy 2010, p. 67)

Another important potential of blended learning is its promotion of student-centered language education. Wang and Zhang (2022) for instance, argue that foreign language blended learning models play active roles in cultivating and fostering autonomous learning behavior and autonomous learning practices. Similarly, Kaur (2013) states that blended learning facilitates a shift from passive to active learning and transitions from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness. Moreover, it engages learners in different learning situations that foster skills such as computer literacy, self-learning, self-engagement, and technology use. Wang and Zhang (2022) further elaborate that blended learning can integrate resources effectively to support students’ language learning and enhance their ability to become more self-directed. Besides, the affordances for language learning that are available in blended learning are believed to develop some skills in learners such as critical thinking and reflection, motivation, and self-regulation (Morrison and Monteiro 2014). Besides, blended learning increases learners’

engagement. Kenny and New Combe (2011) claim that one of the “major reasons for faculty adoption of the blended technique is to increase student engagement and involvement in the learning process and improve student learning” (p. 47). Hence, blended learning equips learners with several real-world and practical skills, preparing them for the future (Ju and Mei 2018). These skills will help learners translate their “research skills, self-learning skills, self-engagement skills, sense of responsibility and course computer literacy skills into life skills” (Ju and Mei 2018, p. 172)

Blended learning proves also effective in enriching the learning environment and facilitating human interaction (Kim 2012). Stein and Graham (2014) underscore the capacity of online resources and tools to enable learners to engage with the contemporary social web, extending learning beyond the confines of the classroom. Ali et al (2014) cite the potential to enhance students’ teamwork and collaboration skills and highlight its role in fostering knowledge through discussions beyond the classroom.

As a matter of fact, there is enough evidence that blended learning is an effective learning mode and has impacted learners positively and enhanced the ideals of higher education. However, it still can be considered a double-edged sword as its use has revealed some challenges. Therefore, the implementation of blended learning is accompanied by some barriers that are to be tackled. At the level of institutions, not all of them possess the technology and the appropriate infrastructure. Some schools have some limitations, especially in developing countries when it comes to affording high Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructures which will affect later any plan to implement a blended learning approach (Singh et al. 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of some blended learning models can be expensive for schools. According to Beaver et al. (2014), some models of blended learning present greater risks and costs than others due to their significant differences from face-to-face educational models and the technological infrastructure required to support them. Therefore, teachers and learners may be frustrated due to the limited access to necessary resources such as computers, tablets, headsets, and printers. Besides, institutions and instructors had some issues with software licenses, Internet connection, and Webcam (Singh et al. 2021).

At the level of learners, one of the challenges that should be considered is the learners’ financial status. Some learners have some difficulties in affording the needed technological devices which results in their inability to have access to the online phase of the learning process. Graham (2004) argues that e-learning is in favor of the advantages. That is to say, online learning is appropriate for the learner who can afford the resources required for this learning

experience. Moreover, some learners live in isolated and far places where internet access is not strong. Therefore, they often have some difficulties accessing online meetings. Vekiri (2010) highlighted in his study which examines the relationship between the social status of the parents and the learners' perception of technology that financially limited learners are less motivated and confident to use ICT. Finally, another challenge that should be considered before implementing blended learning is the learners' digital literacy. Some learners need extensive training to be able to use technological devices efficiently.

Like in any other concept in education, the implementation of blended learning in a particular context is to be accompanied by such limitations and challenges. However, it is worth mentioning that being willing to make changes can overcome these challenges. For instance, Dowdy (2020) points out that institutions can combat financial barriers by making some adjustments and restructuring the money from budgets in ways that would facilitate change. Therefore, he suggested that money "could be shifted from textbooks and paper to digital resources and training" (p. 26). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that all the challenges are concerned with either financial issues or digital literacy. Kieschnick (2017, cited in Dowdy 2020) argues that "many blended learning models fall flat because the focus was on technology and not on the instructional strategies and academic goals that teachers apply to instruction" (p. 26). This refers to the importance of good planning, training, and professional development of teachers and faculty members as a whole before designing a blended learning approach because even if, the technological devices are provided, other elements should be involved as well. Dowdy (2020) confirms this and says "because we have given everyone a device, we're doing blended learning. You are not necessarily doing that; you have just bought a bunch of devices" (p. 27). This means that knowledge about blended learning, its implementation, its requirements, skills, and instructional strategies are all needed for this approach. Dowdy (2020) further explains that blended learning is not about the availability of tools and devices but how these tools and devices are used to make learning more meaningful, engaging, and impactful.

Drawing on literature evidencing the effectiveness of blended learning in improving learning situations, blended learning fosters effective and engaging learning environments. However, awareness of the potential challenges is imperative for teachers, educators, and stakeholders to navigate the hurdles inherent in the adoption of blended learning especially in contexts such as the Algerian EFL higher education environment in which blended learning is in its early stages.

3.5 Empirical Studies on Blended Learning

The growing prominence of “blended learning” has led to a significant body of comparative studies exploring different aspects. The following section will review the most relevant studies.

3.5.1 Blended Learning VS Face-to-Face Learning in Higher Education

Traditional face-to-face learning methods have been the dominant teaching and learning approaches for many years. They have been used to transmit knowledge from teachers to learners. Classes generally are lecture-based and teacher-oriented which are characterized by teachers’ dominance over classroom activities and instruction. These types of learning are generally characterized by memorization and recitation, rote learning, and a lack of opportunities to promote learners’ independence and thinking skills (Garrett 2008).

The focus in education has then shifted to active learning for students emphasizing mentally active and engaging approaches that encourage student engagement and consider their learning needs when selecting the teaching methods and styles (Fitzsimons 2014; Marina and Tatjana 2020; Rocher 2018). Therefore, the focus has shifted to learner-centered rather than teacher-centered where learners are more actively engaged and the learning process. They are encouraged to discuss, ask questions, collaborate with classmates on tasks, etc. This change in roles and behaviors is commensurate with the shift from behaviorism and conditioning learning theories to constructivism. According to constructivists’ theories, learners’ new knowledge is constructed and built through social interaction with others and the environment as well as in conjunction with their previous knowledge and experiences (Ayse 2008). Koohang and Harman (2005) claim that constructivist theory is a good match for blended learning because mixing traditional education with e-learning and technological innovations inside and outside the classroom promotes active and positive student engagement.

Over the past decades, blended learning has been used as an alternative or adjunct to conventional learning and e-learning and several higher education institutions are using it to improve student learning outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and pedagogical practices (Caner 2012), as well as learners’ active participation in the learning process. Furthermore, blended learning improves learning opportunities by offering effective, flexible, and diverse learning

experiences, facilitates access to a wide range of resources, motivates learners through increased communication, collaboration, and interaction, and supplements course management activities by giving feedback and grading (Bath and Bourke 2010; Saliba et al. 2013; Smyth et al 2012).

Several comparative studies have examined the effectiveness of blended learning and face-to-face learning on learners' learning outcomes and findings suggest that blended learning significantly enhances students' achievements and cognitive outcomes, compared to face-to-face learning (Bazelais and Doleck 2018; Khader 2016; Wei et al. 2017). For example, Bernard et al (2014) conducted a meta-study on the effectiveness of blended learning in the higher education context, and the findings revealed that the performance of learners in blended learning environments was better than those in the traditional classroom. These findings are in agreement with those generated by other studies, making it evident that blended learning is an effective approach when compared to both face-to-face and online learning (Ryan et al. 2016; Northey et al. 2015; Gonzalez-Gomez et al 2016). Learners' preferences for the blended learning setting over conventional learning were also concluded in several studies. Sajid et al (2016) found that students were satisfied with blended learning and appreciated it as a new and effective learning approach that helped them in exam preparation and concept clarification.

Daoud and Mahmoud (2013) explored the impact of blended learning on learners' achievement and found significant statistical differences favoring the students taught in a blended learning setting over those taught in a face-to-face classroom. Their findings highlighted the positive effect of blended learning on students' academic performance and achievement. Similarly, Bencheva (2010) argued that the use of traditional methods of teaching often makes the subject matter "distant" from learners, negatively affecting their motivation levels. To address this, the use of teaching methods should consider ways to engage learners actively in the learning process, including the use of activities that will promote interaction, collaboration, and discussion and stimulate their thinking.

As for the use of blended learning in the field of foreign and second language education, Ivanova et al. (2020), conducted an experimental study on EFL learners in Russia and the findings indicated that the grade of the pilot group increased by 44% compared to the results of the control group which they described as excellent results. Furthermore, they argued that most students preferred the blended learning model because it offers flexibility and convenience. Several other studies have been done so far concerning the four language skills. For instance, reading (Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour 2017) writing skills (Hassan et al 2021, Abdul Rahman et al. 2020), and oral proficiency (Ehsanifard et al. 2020). In essence, the

findings were generated to indicate that blended learning has a positive effect on enhancing foreign language skills. These studies demonstrated that blended learning improves learning outcomes among ESL and EFL students. Wong et al. (2020) compared blended learning with face-to-face learning concerning motivation, academic success, and autonomy. The findings revealed that learners in a blended learning context were better in terms of autonomous learning and motivation than those in conventional learning.

It is clear that blended learning is an effective model. Halverson et al. (2014) argue that it can be the most feasible instruction method for increasing students' performance and they recommend that efforts be made to ensure blended experiences provide high levels of student engagement and supportive environment as well as opportunities to ensure learner satisfaction. Blended learning activities should fully engage learners as a way to promote independent and autonomous learning. To sum up, blended learning is generally viewed as a combination of traditional face-to-face learning with online learning, therefore it combines the characteristics of both face-to-face and online learning including the advantages and strengths that make the blended experience unique and effective. The flexibility of time and place is highly promoted, a wide range of materials are available either in the classroom or online, and teacher-student interaction is ensured both inside and outside the classroom.

3.5.2 Blended Learning VS Online Learning in Higher Education

Distance learning includes any form of learning that is done remotely rather than in a conventional classroom. Morabito et al (1999) identified four generations in the development of online learning: printed instruction, early technology in broadcasting systems, online instruction, and web-based teleconferencing. Therefore, online instruction originates from distance education, and it refers to entirely online education using the internet and technological devices. Online learning can be seen as a replacement or a conversion of traditional classrooms to an online /virtual setting. Therefore, it offers flexible learning modes because the time and place constraints are no longer an issue for distance learners; in contrast, it allows learners to control their learning path, pace, and contingencies of instruction (Lim et al. 2007).

Online learning offers learners greater flexibility; however, some studies have identified some of the challenges and drawbacks that accompany its implementation. One of the biggest issues discussed in the literature is the lack of peer interaction and a sense of belonging. Rovai and Mervyn (2005) argued that the vibrant social life of typical on-campus experience cannot be found in online environments leading to learners' low persistence rates in online courses.

According to them, online students lack a sense of connectedness and belonging compared to their on-campus counterparts leading to learners experiencing isolation and alienation because they are physically separated from the school and its services and from other classmates and friends as well. Therefore, the absence of peer interaction, discussion, and a feeling of isolation may affect the learning process negatively. Moreover, Lim et al. (2007) argue that online learning does not engage learners in online events unless they are already active and self-motivated learners and have strong organizational skills. In this respect, Rovai and Mervyn (2005) suggested that well-structured blended learning programs can overcome the shortcomings of online learning by creating a sense of community and belongingness among the students. Blended learning providing face-to-face instruction along with the online component exploits the advantages of each environment and ensures the maximum use of resources to achieve the instructional goal, and learning objectives, and enhances learners' satisfaction (Kaur 2013). Additionally, it creates opportunities for interaction and keeps the flexibility features as learners can still have control over their learning and study at their convenience.

Lim et al (2007) conducted a comparative study to investigate differences in learner- related variable between two groups of learners exposed to online-only and blended learning delivery formats. Findings reported some differences at different levels. Online learners reported more workload than blended learners leading them to feel unsupported and to experience an increased workload. Furthermore, blended learning provides clearer instructions to learners than in the online format alone. Online learners also experienced some challenges in understanding the subject matter because of the lack of teacher-student interaction which in turn affected their achievement levels compared with blended learners.

It is obvious that by nature one of the important features of blended learning is its use of the best of both face-to-face learning and online learning leading one to believe that it is an effective alternative approach that overcomes the limitations and challenges of each approach. It keeps the learning process flexible while ensuring student-student-teacher interaction. Therefore, learners can experience learning socially with their peers and independently online from home creating an effective learning experience.

3.5.3 Language Learner Autonomy and Blended Learning in Higher Education

Learner autonomy refers to learners' ability to take charge of their own learning (Holec 1981). Hence, learners should be active in their learning process, and they should be given some

opportunities to decide the when, why, what, and how of their learning. Loyens et al. (2008) supported this view and argued that learning is an active behavior that must be undertaken by learners themselves. Besides, the development of technology and its integration into the learning process has strongly affected many aspects of learning and more particularly, it brought many opportunities to cultivate learners' autonomous abilities in foreign language education. Researchers including Benson (2007), Zhang and Wu (2009), Lai and Gu (2011), Lewis 2013, Rienties et al. (2018), and Shadiev and Yang 2020 have investigated the role of modern technology in enhancing learners' autonomous learning. Their studies consistently advocated the positive impact technology has on learners' autonomous learning.

Several studies have investigated learner autonomy in the blended learning environment. Banditvilai (2016) conducted a case study on using blended learning to enhance EFL students' language skills and learner autonomy and the findings revealed that the blended learning model improves EFL language skills, autonomous learning behaviors, and learners' motivation. Yoon's study (2016) shares the same findings and confirms that learners have positive perspectives on blended learning for promoting learner autonomy in EFL classes. Wang and Zhang (2022) argue that neither fully online nor face-to-face learning is in favor of autonomous learning. While the former leads to a lack of systematic knowledge, the latter drives students to reluctance and passivity in the learning process. Therefore, both will not affect autonomous learning behaviors positively. As a result, they suggest that the appropriate combination of the two modes of delivery as in blended learning can enhance students' ability for autonomous learning and their autonomous behaviors.

It is argued that individuals act autonomously when their acts are volitional (Yuan and Kim 2017). Therefore, learners act autonomously in the learning process when they are engaged in an activity solely for volition, pleasure, and/ or choice (Tucker et al. 2017). When learners are given choices as to some aspects of their learning, they are likely to become autonomous. Blended learning provides students with choices (Mirriahi et al. 2015) and has the potential to enhance their autonomy in different ways. Learners, for example, depending on their interests, can demonstrate their learning through presentations, videos, and posters (Mchone 2020). Moreover, blended learning offers learners some choices over when to learn, especially in the online portion of learning (Tsneq and Walsh 2016). Herlina et al. (2019) assert that blended courses provide learners with a chance to experience both collaborative and autonomous work. This method of instruction encourages student-centered learning as it allows students to explore the learning at their own pace and time. Mchone (2020) confirms this and says that teachers-

led instruction shifts toward the student in blended learning therefore, the focus is on students leading to autonomous and independent learning being carried out.

Blended learning is a student-centered environment that focuses on learners' needs and interests. It also offers a personalized learning experience as it reflects learners' initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity as the main body during the learning process (He 2005). Therefore, as discussed in the paragraphs above, it has the potential to meet the need for autonomous learning.

3.6 The Culture of Blended Learning in the Algerian EFL Higher Education Context

Recent trends in higher education around the globe emphasize the adoption of education approaches that exploit the benefits of information and communication technologies and extend physical classrooms beyond their four walls (Bonk et al. 2012). These approaches include but are not limited to blended learning. In the Algerian EFL higher education context, attempts to integrate technology into the classroom and shift to more flexible and innovative learning approaches have been limited. Hence, traditional approaches in EFL teaching and learning have long dominated. It was only at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that Algerian higher education called for a rapid transition to a blended learning approach. The historical evolution of blended learning in Algeria and the impact of COVID-19 on EFL blended practices is the focus of the sections to follow.

3.6.1 Tracing the Evolution of Blended Learning in the Algerian Context

During the Algerian War of Independence, most of the Algerians were not educated because education like any other sector was dominated by the French colonial administration. However, after its independence, Algeria made many efforts to educate the population as this is very crucial to help in enhancing all the other sectors which were left totally ruined.

The first attempt to universalize education in Algeria was seen by the creation of the National Center for Generalized Education which was established according to order No. 67/69 on May 22, 1969 (Guemide and Maouch 2020). This center was operating through correspondence using radio, printed documents, and television. The aim was to enable all the population regardless of age, place, and time to have access to education. Even individuals who were enrolled in public schools can still enroll in such centers to improve their knowledge. Furthermore, this center organizes some physical classes to allow participants to engage more

meaningfully in the learning experience through meeting some tutors (Guemide and Maouch 2020). Newspapers such as Elmasaa (the Evening) were also used as a means for education in which exercises and their solutions were published in referenced materials. Additionally, in February 1987, in order to produce audiovisual documents, an audiovisual laboratory was established. These centers can be seen as an early beginning of the blended learning approach as they offer the opportunity for learners to study in their own time and place using some available materials and the opportunity to meet with tutors to add another dimension to their learning. Subsequently, due to technological development and its effect on education, the center was transferred to the national office for distance education and training on September 30, 2001 (Guemide and Maouch 2020). The objectives were the same, but the methods were different with the allocation of some modern technological tools.

Another early example of the blended learning approach in the Algerian context was the establishment of the University of Continuous Formation in 1990. It served as a precursor to current blended learning arrangements; The aim was to give access to higher education to those who stopped their education due to their circumstances (Guemide and Maouch 2020). These centers blend class presence and the use of ICTs and other printed materials in the learning process.

At the level of the universities and higher education institutions, the adoption of online and blended learning was left to the university's choice. Although universities established an e-learning system in 2006 attempting to integrate ICTs into Algerian higher education (Bin Herzallah, 2021), the platform was primarily used for administrative purposes such as announcements, exam timetabling, and dissemination of students' grades, rather than for teaching and learning purposes. Therefore, the main course delivery method was a traditional face-to-face format in which teaching and interaction occurred inside the classroom. However, with the spread of Coronavirus, the educational sector has been significantly affected. For the sake of protecting people's lives and preventing the spread of this deadly virus, Algeria, like any other country in the world has imposed some health measures restrictions including the closure of all educational institutions for an indefinite period.

According to Order No / 288 a.kh.2020 dated February 29, 2020 (www.mesrs.dz), the Ministry of Higher Education called the heads of regional university seminars and the directors of universities to plan for a pedagogical initiative. This initiative aimed to ensure the continuity of education remotely using online platforms. The minister set March 15, 2020, as the implementation date (Boutlidja 2021). This involves creating online pedagogical support to

maintain remote interaction between learners and teachers and replacing face-to-face lecturing lessons, directed works, and civil applied works with equivalent online activities (Boutlidja 2021, p. 514). However, the Algerian universities seized all pedagogical activities for a period of six months because a full transition to online learning was not feasible. This was due to the lack of experience among teachers, learners, and staff in online education as well as limited ICT infrastructure (Laifa et al. 2023). Therefore, the ministry waited until September 2020, when there was a decrease in the declared number of infected cases to allow a blend of face-to-face sessions and online instruction (Rahmani and Zitouni 2022). Blended learning was therefore officially adopted in the academic year 2020-2021. The Algerian Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research declared his attention to keep using this new approach namely blended learning even post-COVID and emphasized that:

The exploitation of the positive aspects of digitalization and the use of information and communication technologies would constitute the basic and prominent elements in the functioning of the university tomorrow

(Boutlidja 2021, p. 514).

Laifa et al. (2023) commented on this and explained that the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research had announced that blended learning is under consideration as a possible permanent plan for Algerian higher education.

3.6.2 The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on BL Practices in Algerian EFL Context

As stated earlier, before the pandemic, education in Algeria was based mainly on face-to-face instruction. However educational institutions in general and universities, in particular, transitioned rapidly to blended learning as it was the best option to carry on education during the crisis of COVID-19. Working on the changes launched by the Ministry, Algerian universities have implemented Moodle electronic systems to initiate online education support by keeping an ongoing interaction between teachers and learners and resorting to a combination of online and face-to-face teaching (Boutlidja 2021; Guemide and Maouch 2020; Ghounane 2020). These platforms were used to upload content such as lectures, videos, assignments, assessments, and other materials. In addition to Moodle, teachers used many other platforms such as Google Meet, Teams, Skype, Google Classrooms, and Zoom to host live classes (Ghounane 2022). However, only a few teachers use Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook for the same end because according to them they are informal ways of learning (Ghounane 2021). Regarding the face-to-face component of blended learning, sessions were limited to one per group per week. These sessions were used for practical activities, revisions,

discussions, and some final summative assessments for some modules (Rahmani and Zitouni 2022).

The rapid shift to a new teaching and learning approach created significant challenges for teachers, learners, and faculty members as well. Singh et al. (2021) argue that educators “who had never taught online classes previously had the challenge to adapt to the new norm and move their entire content to an online medium within a very short period” (p. 151). He further explained these challenges by saying that the expertise needed to teach online cannot be acquired in ten days. Teaching online is not like teaching in an on-campus setting. It requires careful planning, knowledge, and familiarity with specific methods and theoretical backgrounds, and the application of principles of course, and instructional design to ensure meaningful, engaging, and effective learning experiences for learners (Ellaway and Masters, 2008). The above-mentioned challenges describe exactly the obstacles found in the Algerian context so far. For instance, Boutlidja (2021) argues that Algerian universities face great challenges at the formative, technological, professional, and planning levels to create an effective blended learning environment. Ghounane (2020) argues that both novice and old teachers have developed a technophobia toward the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the use of electronic platforms. Therefore, the fear of technology and limited knowledge of software and pedagogical strategies to teach online made the experience of teaching in online learning or blended learning difficult. Barbar (2020) conducted a study that examined teachers and their perceptions about the use of Moodle platform during the COVID-19 lockdown. She concluded that more than 70% of the participants were not satisfied with the experience due to their limited knowledge of technology, and they all preferred the face-to-face mode. Moreover, 64.3% of the participants described their feelings as being frustrated and feeling incompetent to handle the electronic platforms. On the same note, Guessabi (2021) conducted a study entitled “Flipped Classrooms in Higher Education in Algeria during the Period of COVID: Challenges and Difficulties” and concluded that knowledge of technology and the availability of technological devices were found to be the main obstacles to make this new approach meaningful. The teachers’ perceptions of the online medium of instruction can be said to be negative because most of them had no or minimal experience in working with technology and as discussed in the previous section, the ministry transitioned to an online learning environment in a very limited time frame. Therefore, teachers were not given time to be fully prepared for this new experience.

The studies mentioned above discussed teachers’ perceptions about online and blended

learning. However, few studies focused on learners' perceptions of this new learning experience and what has it brought to their learning habits, skills, and learning situation. Ghounane (2020) conducted a study entitled "Moodle or Social Networks: What Alternative Refuge is Appropriate to Algerian EFL Students to Learn during the COVID-19 Pandemic". The findings revealed that Facebook was the most used tool because learners were motivated to use social media for their learning and the second tool was Moodle. The analysis of the results gives another dimension to the e-learning situation in Algeria. Students preferred face-to-face interaction more than virtual learning, however, they showed high motivation toward using both social networks and educational platforms like Moodle as complementary teaching materials. This illustrates learners' preference for blended learning rather than fully online learning. Ghounane (2020) argues that learners believe that online sessions, tasks, and activities are helpful after the lectures. This implies that learners prefer to learn physically and then use online resources from home to complement their learning process. Therefore, it is evident that blended learning is an effective approach to language education in Algerian universities as a first step to employing innovative instructional methods. Moreover, literature on blended learning during and post COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that blended learning can impact learners positively as it fits their preferences of combining the face-to-face medium of instruction with online learning opportunities (Ghounane 2022; Laifa et al. 2023; Rahmani and Zitouni 2022).

Blended learning is in its early beginnings in the Algerian context; hence there is a need to do more research about its impact on learners as they are important agents in the learning process. Furthermore, the focus of research should not be only on the availability of ICTs, computers, or technologies. However, it should go beyond that because course design for blended learning is not merely "about technology or the transference of course content to a new medium but creating effective learning environments that optimize learning" (Schaber et al. 2010, p. 3) and in which learning outcomes are successfully and positively evaluated. Schaber et al. (2010) further explain the characteristics of an effective learning environment that should be taken into account when designing blended learning courses by saying that effective learning environments are learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered. From this point, a learner-centered environment refers to one that encourages active learning, motivates students, and considers the skills, knowledge, feelings, and attitudes that learners bring with them to the classroom. An effective learning environment is also knowledge-centered in which systematic organization and planning take place to identify significant learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is also assessment-centered which means the teachers

should always be aware of the learners' progress during the entire learning process, and in case of any misconception, appropriate feedback will be provided, and learners will be allowed to work on that feedback. Finally, an effective learning environment is community-centered because learners being groups or cohorts provide the motivation, support, and challenge to foster growth. The aspects mentioned above are some examples of what research on blended learning in a given context should focus on. As far as the Algerian educational context is concerned, the focus of research so far is on the technology side. This means that there is a need to conduct more research to investigate the learning process and the learning experience as a whole. To this end, this research endeavors to investigate Algerian EFL learning experiences in blended learning taking into account the characteristics of what an effective learning environment is.

To conclude, regardless of the challenges that both teachers and learners are encountering, change still can take place if the necessary efforts are made. Educators should spend both time and money to make the future of blended learning in Algeria successful. As Guesser (2020) mentioned in her article, "education is the best investment and the educated individual is the basis of progress and advancement in a changing society, developed and open to all that is new" (p. 128).

3.7 Conclusion

21st-century students spend over 10,000 hours of their lives engaged in technology (Ceylan and Kesici 2017). From gaming, and messaging to learning, the internet and technology are a part of students' everyday lives. Therefore, education should embrace educational technology to align the learning context with students' interests. Besides, the literature on blended learning has revealed its deep implications for education, especially EFL learning.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the different benefits that blended learning offers, from increased flexibility and accessibility to enhanced engagement and control over learning. Drawing on the study findings comparing blended learning to other instruction methods, namely face-to-face and online learning, there has been compelling evidence supporting not only its effectiveness in promoting the learning environment in different ways but also in giving space for learners to control some aspects of their learning.

However, as we investigate blended learning from a pedagogical and educational perspective, we must remain cautious about the cultural context within which it is implemented. In the Algerian EFL context and in many other developing countries, factors such as infrastructure

limitations, experience, training, and technological literacy shape the blended learning experiences. To create engaging and meaningful learning experiences tailored to the needs of students, instructors, and academic administrators must focus on providing an appropriate learning environment with needed infrastructure that supports blended learning methods. While it is imperative to consider such technological factors, the focus should not be only on them but also on pedagogical practices. This is well argued in the literature as approaches incorporating online learning have frequently been viewed as being technologically rather than pedagogically driven (Vogel 2010). Therefore, to shift to more student-centered education, a renewed focus on pedagogy must take place. It is extremely important to understand how blended learning supports student learning (Boskz 2012; Mishra and Koehler 2006). For this reason, the focus of the present study is on how learners integrate technology into their learning in a blended context. Algerian EFL blended learning experiences are assessed in terms of how online learning approaches, online tools and resources, and integration of innovative technology facilitate learning with a special focus on the fostering of autonomy.

This study aims to highlight the practices of students in such a context and to what extent they interact with the affordances that technology offers to enhance their learning. As we look to the future, it is clear that blended learning will continue to reshape education and offer new opportunities and challenges for both instructors and learners.

Chapter Four: Methodological and Analytical Frameworks

4.1 Introduction

Words, which are by far the most common form of qualitative data, are a speciality of humans and their organizations. Narratives, accounts, and other collections of words are variously described as ‘rich’, ‘full’, and ‘real’, and contrasted with the thin abstractions of number. Their collection is often straightforward; they lend verisimilitude to reports.

(Robson et al., 2011, pp. 465-466).

I selected the above quotation to start the following chapter because it determines the power of words in narrative research and how their use leads to accurate findings. This study is a narrative one, therefore, words are the main form of data.

I dedicate this chapter to describing my approach to investigating the research problem and answering the research questions set for this study. I first discuss the philosophical assumptions that underpin this research and my philosophical stance. Then, I describe the overall research methodology used in this study, highlighting the rationale for selecting the qualitative narrative framework. I also outline the specific methods and approaches that have been chosen, providing a detailed explanation of all the procedures used to collect, organize, and analyze data. Throughout the sections of this chapter, I will try to justify all my choices. This part is seen as pivotal because it provides readers with insights into the rationales behind selecting these methods and approaches. According to Crotty (1998), such justification is essential for readers to critically evaluate the generated research findings.

4.2 Research Paradigms

Research is often defined as an inquiry conducted to discover truths about the world. Cohen et al. (2007) state that research is the most effective method for discovering truth. They define research as an empirical, systematic, and intellectual investigation of the relationship between some phenomena. To this end, some methods, theories, and approaches are always being used by people as means. These, however, are always influenced by a set of scientific beliefs, ideas, and assumptions known as a research paradigm.

Kuhn (1970) defines research paradigms as a set of common beliefs, assumptions, and agreements that researchers hold about how phenomena should be investigated. That is, the

way a given research problem is investigated and addressed is determined by these beliefs and assumptions and they are for research what “footings are for the house, they form the foundation of the whole edifice” (Grix 2004, p. 57). Two main paradigms have been identified for educational research namely positivism and interpretivism. The positivist paradigm is usually used in natural sciences and physical science. Typically, it assumes that reality is independent of human beings and cannot be studied by the human senses. However, the interpretive paradigm contradicts the positivist and assumes that “each human interprets his world and acts based on such interpretation” (Hammersley 2013, p. 27). Therefore, multiple realities exist.

As for research philosophies, two well-established assumptions exist in social sciences research namely, epistemology and ontology. While epistemology focuses on understanding how we acquire knowledge and what is considered valid, acceptable knowledge, ontology is concerned with social entities and focuses on what exists and can be investigated (Walliman 2006). That is, ontology refers to the essence of social reality, whereas epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge, its forms, and how we should investigate it. In this regard, adherence to a given assumption can strongly influence the choices a researcher makes in terms of the chosen methodology and how the findings are to be interpreted (Bryman 2012).

For my research into investigating the impact of blended learning on the development of Algerian EFL learners’ autonomy, the researcher takes on the interpretive stance because the positivist approach is to some extent inappropriate for this study. Positivist researchers seek to establish a hypothesis and collect the necessary data to test the hypothesis. However, my aim in this study is to investigate the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment as they are in their natural setting and captured through the eyes of the participants. This study does not intend to prove or falsify any hypothesis, it rather seeks to develop a better understanding of the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment in the higher education context, the influence of their past learning experiences on the development of their autonomy, and how the implementation of blended learning as a result of COVID 19 has changed their learning culture/habits and their autonomy development. The researcher believes that the reality about this specific knowledge can only be understood and explained from learners’ perspectives through social interaction between the researcher and the learners using some reflective data collection tools that will serve as a window into learners’ beliefs and experiences such as narratives (Mercer 2013) and will allow a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in a more authentic context.

Moreover, positivism does not align with my philosophical assumptions. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the choice of methodology should be based on responses to the ontological and epistemological questions. The ontological position adopted by the researcher in this study views individuals or more precisely learners as reflective thinkers who can reflect on and discuss their language learning experiences. These experiences are subjective, and specific, and depend for their content on the person who told them. Therefore, I believe in the subjective view of inquiry because to understand how blended learning affects Algerian EFL learners' language learning process concerning autonomy development, there is a need to understand learners' subjective experiences. Epistemologically, I adopt an inductive approach. That is, knowledge is not there to be found but rather constructed. To interpret a phenomenon that is related to learners, it is necessary to understand their views, actions, and practices; particularly, to understand how blended learning affects the development of Algerian EFL learners' autonomy, the researcher needs to go into the field to try to discover this knowledge by investigating the learners personally because that knowledge can only be told by learners themselves. Indeed, this investigation process includes a co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participants. Additionally, I believe that the social construction of knowledge is influenced not only by learners, teachers, and the researcher but also by the social and educational context in which the study is situated. Therefore, what I aim to present in this research is an authentic account of learners' experiences in fully face-to-face and blended learning contexts in a process that involves the interaction of different individuals and aspects.

Having committed myself to a relativist ontological and epistemological stance, I have chosen a qualitative narrative methodological approach for this research. This is because the research problem investigated in this study is best understood through the eyes of the participants; therefore, their perceptions, views, and experiences are of paramount importance. This aligns with Lantolf and Pavlenko's (2001) argument that narrative research approaches view language learners not as object of inquiry but as human beings who "actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning" (p. 145). This approach recognizes the active role of learners in shaping their educational experiences and ensures that their voices are represented.

4.3 The Qualitative Narrative Approach

Based on the researcher's philosophical assumptions and the aims of the present investigation that require in-depth information from participant's perspectives, this study has adopted a qualitative narrative research methodology. The next few paragraphs will elaborate on the rationale behind this decision and choice.

Briefly, a qualitative methodology is any collection, analysis, and interpretation of non-numerical data to understand phenomena. It is generally employed to address some questions about the complex nature of phenomena and explain them from the participants' point of view (Myres 2000). Another significant definition of the qualitative approach is the one articulated by Creswell (1994):

Inquiry process of understanding social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in natural settings

(p. 21)

This method of inquiry has received many plaudits, for instance, Merriam (1998) asserts that research seeking an understanding of phenomena from the perspectives of those being studied can significantly contribute to the knowledge base and practices of education. Therefore, it is an appropriate approach to understanding education-related phenomena, and studies adopting it would contribute significantly to literature or the debate trends that are related to some issues in education. Furthermore, adopting such an approach would allow researchers to capture not only the inner experiences of participants but also provide a detailed description of the social context of the research, which is indeed a compelling reason for choosing this method of inquiry. In this regard, Creswell (1994) stated that one of the main reasons to conduct qualitative studies is their exploratory nature, where the researcher aims to listen to participants and construct an understanding based on their perspectives (p.2). On the same note, Myers (2000) argues that:

A major strength of the qualitative approach is the depth to which explorations are conducted and descriptions are written, usually resulting in sufficient details for the reader to grasp the idiosyncrasies of the situation.

(Myers 2000, Qualitative studies and generalisations, par. 6)

Thus, the qualitative approach provides rich and deep explorations of participants' experiences and generates well-written research reports.

The above-mentioned characteristics make the qualitative approach ideally suited for this study. However, to situate the current study within the broader framework of qualitative methodology, it is important to highlight that it aligns particularly with the narrative inquiry approach which places participants' experiences at the core of the research process. As Barkhuizen (2014) argues, narrative inquiry is well suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct meaning. I choose to call my approach “qualitative narrative” not only because narrative approaches belong to qualitative research but also the type of narrative inquiry adopted in this study, as explained in section 4.5, makes it often indistinguishable from qualitative research, as is the case in many other studies in applied linguistics (Benson 2014).

It has been argued that quantitative methodology can be limited for some studies compared to qualitative methods (Silverman 2010). For instance, in the present study, I aim to explore the Algerian EFL learners' experiences with studying in fully face-to-face learning and blended learning environments and how this impacts their autonomy development; quantitative methods are to some extent inappropriate. They will keep me distant from those I am studying, therefore they provide little contact with EFL learners which would affect the authentic data-gathering process and consequently data analysis process. However, using the qualitative narrative methodology for such a research problem could address this issue because it allows direct contact with the participants and explores the research problem in a more authentic natural setting which would surely affect positively the social co-construction of knowledge that is representative of the real context. That is why the decision to use qualitative narrative methodology in this study was deemed preferable. It enables me to have a deep understanding of the experiences of Algerian EFL learners. Moreover, the qualitative and narrative data tools that I have chosen namely narrative frames and interviews will help me get access to the deeply embedded personal opinions of the learners because learners, like any other human, are storytellers who engage in narrative acts to explain and interpret their life events and experiences (Sikes and Gale 2006 cited in Mendieta 2013, p. 136). This is where the contribution of narrative research becomes significant within the broader qualitative framework in the field of second language education, as it focuses on the exploration and understanding of the lived experiences of those involved in teaching and learning languages (Barkhuizen et al. 2014; Ghanbar et al. 2024).

Furthermore, such an approach enables researchers to establish closer contact with learners as the researcher's role is crucial in qualitative narrative research (Ghanbar et al. 2024), especially when investigating a context he/she is familiar with. Indeed, the literature on social research

acknowledges the role of researchers and the subjective perspectives from which they approach a given problem (Sikes and Potts 2008; Wellington 2015). For them, the background knowledge and experience researchers have of the researched context impact positively the whole research process facilitating both the design and the reporting of the study. In addition, this familiarity with the research setting facilitates access to the research participants and the context as a whole (Wellington 2015). On the same note, Morrow (2005) argues that being familiar with the research context helps in interpreting the meaning that participants make of their experiences. As a previous EFL learner in the Algerian higher education context, getting access to my participants was not a difficult task for me, also, the deep insights and knowledge I had about the Algerian sociocultural context helped me to design the research effectively and appropriately in terms of comfort and ethics. Furthermore, being fluent in the participants' mother tongue along with my awareness of the language diversity in Algeria is another contextual knowledge that would help me maintain the flow of data as much as possible. Algeria is a multilingual context where participants come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. While some have Berber as their native language, others speak Arabic. Besides French is the first foreign language and English is the second. These differences in linguistic backgrounds influence communication practices and language preferences, which I take into account to facilitate meaningful interaction during data collection. This is well supported by Pavlenko (2007) who suggested a consideration of the language shared by the researcher and participants when eliciting narratives.

Social science research is recognized for its subjectivity because it focuses on the experiences and perceptions of individuals regarding various phenomena. On this issue, Cohen et al. (2007) explain that:

Social science is seen as a subjective rather than objective undertaking, as a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts, and when social scientists understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants

(p.19).

As far as this study is concerned, I do not perceive foreign language learning-related problems as purely objective phenomena independent of the learner's context but rather as an "ecological system" (Palfreyman 2014) in which the interaction of various learners, teachers, materials, and other elements should be considered for the functioning of the system. Therefore, the context in which learners live and learn impacts not only their learning but also shapes their attitudes and views about some learning situations. In this study, I explore the learners'

experiences including their attitudes, views, and opinions about EFL learning in a blended learning context and how the implementation of blended learning impacts their autonomy. Such understanding is subjective and is shaped by psychological as well as contextual factors. Therefore, instead of experimentation, it is better to investigate these experiences by directly engaging and interacting with learners in their natural and social learning context. On this issue, Morrow (2005) highlights that to understand the constructions of meanings participants make, it is important to rely on several factors such as context, culture, and rapport. This is referred to as “Contextual grounding” (p.253) and is considered a crucial criterion to interpret the meanings participants attach to their experiences.

Therefore, I believe that such deep-lying meanings are most effectively constructed (not discovered) through the perspectives of the learners themselves. This is in line with Lamb’s (2005) view that the process of building knowledge about a phenomenon like learning involves exploration rather than discovery. Moreover, learner autonomy is a complex and multi-dimensional notion (Little 1991). On this basis, investigating it necessitates methodologies that go beyond the capacity of the quantitative approaches. Taboada et al. (2009) argue that to expand our understanding of learners’ autonomy, there is a need for a thorough exploration that focuses on learners’ perspectives as well as their attitudes towards different aspects of their learning experiences. Similarly, Reinders (2005) emphasized that most research in the area of learner autonomy depends on the learner as a primary source of information, making it essential to investigate their understanding and perceptions of the phenomena being studied. Therefore, in this study, I choose a method that would help me capture learners’ deep-lying perceptions and beliefs concerning their EFL learning experiences in relation to their autonomy development (Benson 2011) rather than explore the issue superficially.

One of the issues related to qualitative methodology, including the narrative one, is the question of subjectivity which cannot be ignored because it investigates personal views, opinions, and perceptions. In addition to participant issues, there should be also consideration of the researchers’ perceptions and their influence on the research (Ghanbar et al. 2024). Therefore, researchers must be aware of their biases and their potential influence on the overall study generally and on data collection, analysis, and interpretation particularly. However, after conducting a methodological synthesis of narrative inquiry research in applied linguistics on 291 studies published from 2012 to 2022, Ghanbar et al. (2024), highlighted significant gaps in ethical transparency and researcher reflexivity. Specifically, nearly half of the studies reviewed did not report or address ethical considerations, and more than half lacked explicit

statements on researcher positionality. Acknowledging the importance of these aspects and their impact on the quality of the research. I have explicitly addressed my own subjectivity in this study, ensuring that ethical concerns and my positionality as a researcher are clearly articulated (see details in sections in 4.6.4, 4.7, and 4.8).

Therefore, on the one hand, in this study, I worked on the aspects that could bear subjectivity. On the other hand, I recognize also that complete objectivity cannot be guaranteed in research of this nature. Ramazanoglu (1992, p. 211) explained that “it is more logical to accept our subjectivity, our emotions, and our socially grounded positions than to assume some of us can rise above them”. Therefore, subjectivity is not only acknowledged in qualitative research but is considered an integral part of the research process (Wellington 2015). Morrow (2005) further elaborated on this argument and explained that:

Qualitative researchers acknowledge that the very nature of the data we gather and the analytic processes in which we engage are grounded in subjectivity. Depending on the underlying paradigm, we may work to limit, control, or manage subjectivity, or we may embrace it and use it as data[...] all research is subjective to researcher bias.

(p. 254).

Being aware of the inherent subjectivity in qualitative studies, I managed and controlled my influence as much as possible. For example, this study is exploratory in nature aiming to explore learners’ experiences rather than verifying a pre-established hypothesis. I explore the learners’ experiences and use them as data to explain the language learning situation in the EFL Algerian higher education context. That is, rather than using data to validate or refute an existing theory, knowledge about the Algerian language learning situation is developed from the data collected. So, I will avoid influencing the learners because narrative frames and responses of the interviews are freely told, and all their voices are to be mentioned as they were. Indeed, I ensure transparency and confidentiality in transmitting learners’ perceptions and voices by maintaining my ethical commitment towards participants.

However, I will embrace the benefits of being an insider (Wellington 2015) researcher because of my “contextual grounding” (Morrow 2005). My knowledge of the socio-cultural and situational context of the research my familiarity with the educational background of the participants as well as my understanding of the research topic would help me understand accurately and appropriately the meanings participants attach to their learning experiences.

4.4 Research Design: The Narrative Case Study

Developing a well-structured research design is crucial to ensure the accuracy and effectiveness of any research project. Walliman (2006) described research design as “the framework into which the research fits depending on the theory and the research problem” (p. 10). This guides all the procedures of the research such as collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. These research activities help researchers fulfil the aims of the research, answer the questions of their research, and solve the research problem. Accordingly, the process of selecting an appropriate research design, methods, and tools to collect data should be carried out cautiously to avoid unforeseen difficulties and misleading information. As discussed above, this study is qualitative narrative therefore, it uses a narrative case study to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences.

Narrative inquiries often rely on case studies because they are interpretive and qualitative. This approach involves selecting a small group of individuals in a specific geographical area as research participants to investigate contemporary real-life phenomena through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Yin 2014). As such, a case study “provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (Cohen, et al., 2007 p. 253). Therefore, it focuses on exploring and describing individuals in a specific social context.

Merriam (2009) describes case studies as being particularistic, descriptive, and holistic. A case study is particularistic because it sheds light on a particular situation, event, or program where significance is given to what it represents. It is descriptive because it provides a “complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated” (Merriam 2009, p.43). The case study is also holistic because it provides a comprehensive explanation of the case to readers. Merriam (2009) further asserts that one of the characteristics of a case study is its boundness. That is, the case and individuals being investigated should be temporarily or spatially bound. Therefore, the case is explored in relation to its specific location. Furthermore, the case can be single, or multiple, and three possible categories of case studies can be identified namely, descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory (Yin 2014). Depending on the purpose and aim of a particular study, case study design may fall into one of the earlier cited categories, for example, a descriptive case study aims to describe a phenomenon and the data as they naturally occur without making any change. The research questions associated with this type are generally

“what” “where” and “when” (Yin 2014). Exploratory case studies are conducted to investigate a problem or a phenomenon that is not clearly defined and represents one of the researcher’s interests; it is associated with questions like “what” and “when”, and the objective is to develop hypotheses and propositions for further queries. The third category, explanatory case study sets out to explain “why” some phenomena or events exist. Unlike descriptive case studies which ask questions like “what”, “when” “where” etc., explanatory case studies ask questions like “why” and “how” to identify reasons and causes behind the occurrence of the phenomenon and try to establish links and relationships between events (Yin 2014).

Based on the discussion above, this research adopted a single exploratory case study. As the current study explores the Algerian EFL learners’ experiences in a blended learning and fully face-to-face context in relation to their autonomy development, it is deemed appropriate that the exploratory case study approach described by Yin (2014) is more suitable:

A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (a case) in depth and within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident.

(p. 16).

The rationale for the choice of the exploratory case study in the present research relies on its advantages which can be aligned with my aims in this study. First of all, my study investigates a contemporary phenomenon which is learners’ autonomy and attempts to foster it within the boundaries of the Algerian context. Furthermore, it is believed that a case study gives a rich and in-depth investigation and penetration into the core of the matter and helps explain the complexities in real-life situations (Zainal 2007); an aspect that is needed for my study to have valid and accurate findings. Moreover, this type of inquiry suits my interpretive epistemology as it explores the phenomenon in its real-world context and favors the collection of data in natural settings (Yin 2014) and through the eyes of the participants. According to Nguyen (2014), one of the characteristics of case study research is the combination of a variety of data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. Therefore, it suits the researcher’s choice of data collection tools which will be discussed in section (4.6.3). Finally, since case study research provides a deep understanding of a given research problem in a particular context, it fills the gap in the literature concerning learner autonomy, the factors facilitating and preventing its promotion, and the suggestion of blended learning as a technique to create an autonomous environment within the Algerian educational context.

It is argued that when researchers conduct a single case study, it is important that they carefully approach the case to ensure sufficient access to the case study evidence while reducing the risk

of misinterpretation (Yin 2003). Therefore, it is important to explicitly explain and justify the rationales behind selecting one case over another. The choice of Algerian EFL learners as the case to be investigated was deemed preferable because of its site and location appropriateness. Marshall and Rossman (2006) provide some criteria for selecting a good research location (a) ensuring that the site is accessible; (b) there is a good chance that the elements in which the researcher is interested are present, (c) the site enables trust building with participants, (d) ethical conduct and reporting are possible and (e) a good quality of data and trustworthiness of the study are ensured. These criteria ensure that the chosen site is suitable for effective research conduct in terms of ensuring access, potential data, ethical standards, trust, and reliable data. These criteria had to some extent guided my choice. First of all, the case being investigated in this study was deemed not only accessible but also manageable. All the participants of this research were in a single geographic area with which the researcher is familiar, making the accessibility issue easy. Second, the site, individuals, context, and program being investigated are relevant to the research's aims and the researcher's interests. The main aim of this study is to develop a better understanding of the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment in the higher education context, the influence of their past learning experiences on the development of their autonomy, and how the implementation of blended learning as a result of COVID 19 has changed their learning culture/habits and their autonomy development. The case chosen was that of Algerian EFL learners who study the English language in a blended learning context. Therefore, it has the potential to illuminate the research aims as Stake (2000) suggested that one criterion to select the case is the one "from which we feel we can learn the most" (p. 446). Third, focusing on one site in research provides opportunities to develop a trusting relationship between the researcher and the participants; an aspect that is appropriate for this research as data are being told narratively by participants and knowledge is explored through their eyes. During the data collection period, I had no doubts that close contact with participants would allow me to gain authentic and deep-embedded information. Finally, every effort has been made to address all ethical considerations, ensuring that the case being investigated adheres to ethical guidelines (see details in section 4.7). Indeed, the case has provided valuable data that the researcher was interested in.

Meanwhile, since this study emphasizes the experiences of the participants and their stories play a significant role, it also adopts a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry can refer to "any approach to research that make use of stories or storytelling" (Benson 2018, p. 597). It focuses on the narratives and stories of individuals to understand a research problem. The use

of narrative inquiry varies across different disciplines. Polkinghorne (1995) identifies two main forms of narrative inquiry, namely, narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. Narrative analysis uses storytelling as a means to analyze and interpret data. The outcome of the analysis is one or more stories written by the researcher. In contrast, the analysis of narrative approach which is adopted in the current study uses stories as data. Data are typically analyzed through established qualitative methods such as content or thematic analysis (Benson 2014). Simply, it is about retelling the stories that have been told as data. On this aspect, Barkhuizen et al. (2014) argued that “narrative inquiry brings storytelling and research together either by using stories as data or by using storytelling as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings” (p.3). However, it is argued that in the field of applied linguistics, analysis of narratives is the most common approach (Benson 2014; Ghanbar et al. 2024). I adopted the analysis of narrative approach, and I used it as an “interpretive device” to understand learners’ experiences (Lawler 2002). Therefore, exploring learning-related matters using this type of inquiry would have significant implications for research in education (Ghanbar et al. 2024) because it provides learners’ personal accounts about classrooms, schools, educational issues, and the context or setting where they learn. In fact, it helps the researcher to be close to the actual practice of education (Creswell 2014). Therefore, narrative inquiry informs how learners’ experiences shape their learning practices. The first time being exposed to blended learning may raise conflicting situations because learners face different learning situations compared to their face-to-face learning classes; therefore, this change may raise not only opportunities but also challenges. All those learning experiences could be only captured by narrative inquiry because by adopting such a method, learners telling their experiences in the form of stories to the researcher feel listened to and researchers gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell 2014). Therefore, the use of narrative inquiry in researching learning-related issues is appropriate for both learners and researchers. Narrative inquiry is a powerful research tool that helps capture learners’ everyday practices.

In conclusion, to fulfil the aims of this research, the current study merges two different yet complementary methodologies namely, case study and narrative inquiry. To investigate how Algerian EFL learners describe their various EFL learning experiences, learning situations, and contexts, the narrative inquiry approach is used for data collection and analysis. In essence, the narrative approach becomes the methodological lens through which these experiences are explored within the specific boundaries of the selected case.

4.5 Research Procedures Adopted in this Narrative Inquiry

The research procedures adopted in conducting this research are summarized in the following figure (Creswell 2014). They provide clear and comprehensive stages that this research has gone through.

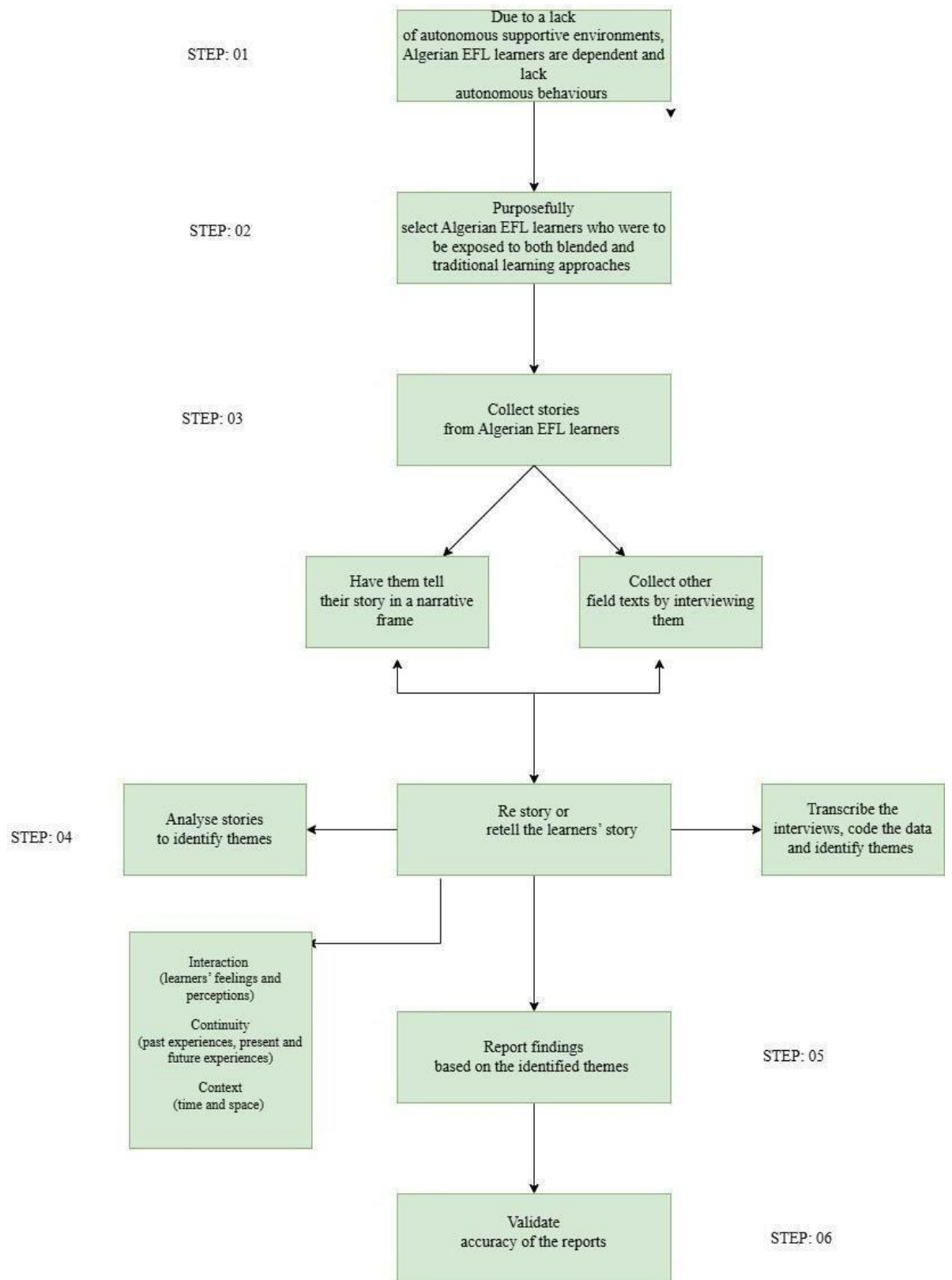


Figure 7: Steps in Conducting Narrative Inquiry

4.5.1 Step One: Identification of an Educational Phenomenon to Explore

As with all research projects, the process in the present study starts by focusing on a research problem and identifying the central phenomenon to explore. The phenomenon of learner autonomy in the Algerian higher education context has been identified by documenting several research articles and master theses that revealed that Algerian EFL learners are passive and dependent on the teacher (Ghout-Khenoune 2014; 2018; 2021; Hadi 2012; 2018; Maouch and Arib 2021; Benaissi 2015; Benaissi and Fedj 2018; Salem 2018), (See more details in Chapter 1 section 1.6.). These studies have focused on learners' readiness for autonomous learning; however, few studies have focused on the role of the social context where learning takes place. Questioning the role and the influence of the social context on learning has recently gained considerable attention in the literature, for example, Cortazzi and Gin (2013) argue that learners' values, beliefs, and perceptions are shaped by their educational culture. On the same note, Harmer (2007) explains that the way learners perceive self-learning is determined by the influence of educational culture.

On the one hand, studies have suggested that the Algerian learning environment needs the creation of a valid context in which space is provided for the development of an autonomous supportive environment (Gout-Khenoune 2021). On the other hand, literature has also advocated the positive impact that technology has on the learning process generally and on enhancing learners' autonomous learning particularly (Benson 2007, Zhang and Wu 2009, Lai and Gu 2011, Lewis 2013, Rientities et al 2018, Yoon 2016, Wang and Zhang 2022). Therefore, this has made my attention more focused and aware that there is a need to explore the concept of learner autonomy in a more specific context of Algeria in a different learning environment namely blended learning to gauge both the limitations and affordances that characterize both the traditional and blended learning environments in terms of autonomous practices.

This study thus endeavors to explore the phenomenon of the influence the learning culture more particularly educational culture has on the development of Algerian learners' autonomy and explore the change their educational culture has witnessed as a result of COVID-19 namely the adoption of blended learning in relation to their autonomy development.

4.5.2 Step Two: Purposefully Select Algerian EFL Learners

As stated in the earlier section, this study adopts a qualitative narrative approach. In narrative studies such as the one being investigated, researchers explore phenomena in their natural

setting. Therefore, the process of selecting the people, institutions, and research sites constitutes a major area of the decision-making process. The research context of this study is the Northern University, Algeria specifically at the Department of English Language. Selecting this university as a research site was important as it provided direct access and first-hand insight into EFL learners' learning experiences. Access to participants was easy and the data were collected from close range as the researcher, as noted earlier, is familiar with this environment and context.

Several sampling methods exist and according to Morrow (2005), researchers select a method that suits the study's objectives and the depth and breadth of information that they seek to gather. Morrow (2005) emphasizes the importance of data adequacy when deciding the sample of the study to ensure trustworthiness. Therefore, deciding the size, characteristics, and types of sampling is a process that should be carried out carefully because of its impact on the type of data being collected which in turn has a major role in the analysis and interpretation of data. This study employed a purposive sampling method, which is mostly used in qualitative studies (Braun and Clarke 2013). In purposive sampling, participants are strategically and intentionally chosen based on the researcher's assumption that they are relevant to the research questions being explored (Bryman 2012). Thus, there should be some criteria upon which the researcher selects a particular unit to be studied. Participants in this study were limited to Algerian EFL learners. The Algerian EFL learners were to be in the second year of a 2-year program for an EFL master's degree course at the Department of English. The EFL master learners were preferred because they had a long period of experience at higher education institutions and therefore, I assumed that they possess advanced and rich experiences with the Algerian higher education system providing rich perceptual repertoire and valuable data on learner autonomy. The selection of EFL master learners was also due to their longer exposure to EFL language learning at university in the traditional learning environment and recently in a blended learning context. They were able to share rich stories and reflections concerning their educational learning habits and practices and how blended learning impacted them.

The sample of this study can be characterized as a homogeneous sample because all the participants share to some extent the same linguistic and educational background. They were all Algerians, they were all at least 22 years old, in their second year of a 2-year program for an EFL master's degree course at the Department of English, working across a range of disciplines, and had been exposed to the same educational culture and experienced learning in

two different learning environments namely blended learning and traditional face to face learning. A homogeneous sample group is important in my research because they share the same educational culture, an aspect that would illuminate my research interests.

The researcher in qualitative research does not seek generalization of results, rather it is to “elucidate the particular” (Creswell 2014, p. 157). This justifies why a small sample size has been selected and is believed to have the potential to help the researcher explore the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, 30 Algerian EFL learners were recruited as a sample of this study.

4.5.3 Step Three: Collect Stories from Learners

Collecting stories was a process when EFL Algerian learners were asked to write their experiences about learning the English language in a blended learning environment in relation to their autonomy development. Two qualitative research tools, namely narrative frames and interviews, were used to capture these experiences.

4.5.3.1 Data Collection Tools

Narrative Frames

The narrative frame serves as a fundamental qualitative research tool in the present study. It refers to a written template that consists of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of different lengths (Barkhuizen et al. 2014). The frame offers participants guidance in both the structure and the content of the stories because

The starters, connectives, and sentence modifiers give participants a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say whilst scaffolding them in the use of a particular generic form.

(Barkhuizen and Wette 2008, p. 375)

Therefore, the frames provide “a skeleton to scaffold writing” (Warmick and Maloch 2003, p. 59) and help the researcher to capture the expected stories.

In education and more particularly in TESOL, narratives are used as a qualitative research tool to gather data to explore language teaching and learning matters by analyzing learners’ past learning experiences (Pavlenko 2007; Mercer 2013; Benson 2014). Mercer (2013) describes narratives as a useful reflective tool that provides insights and understanding into the learners’ thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Therefore, learners interpret the meaning they give to their learning experience by using narration.

In this study, I use this type of data instrument because of its many advantages. Barkhuizen et al (2014) argue that narratives include focused attempts by learners to give meaning to their language learning process by reflecting on their experiences. These constructed, locally situated stories can help students and teachers understand and see “where students have been and where they want to go in terms of their language and personal development” (p. 243). Therefore, narratives allow researchers to penetrate deeply into the learners’ feelings, emotions, identities, and experiences in relation to the learning experiences (Mercer 2013) as they become apparent and easily accessible for research. Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) state that the use of narratives changes the researcher and the researched, changes the use of data type from numbers to words, and changes the focus from general and universal to local and specific. Furthermore, narratives help explore the social context in which learning is taking place because these latter are not an individual production but are shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context (Pavlenko 2007) which will help me understand how the Algerian learning environment changes with the use of blended learning. Furthermore, as the aim of this study is to explore the Algerian learning context, the choice of narratives is appropriate because “when learners are asked to write their stories, they inevitably address contextual, situational and cultural factors as part of the story of their learning” (Oxford, 1996, p. 582). In this regard, Reissman (2008) argues that “stories do not fall from the sky [...] they are composed and received in contexts- interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive- to name only a few” (p. 105). Therefore, learners’ narratives are a good tool to explore the English language learning process in relation to context because learners give meaning to their learning experiences depending on their own understanding of what is appropriate in their context to their language learning process (Barkhuizen et al. 2014)

Moreover, as can be noticed from the discussion above, this narrative data tool is based on the interpretive paradigm which aligns well with the researcher’s epistemological and ontological stances concerning the way knowledge is acquired in this study. Another important point that was considered when deciding to make use of this qualitative data tool is its appropriateness for both participants and the researcher. It is easier for participants to write their experiences and for researchers to analyze data (Hiratsuka 2014). On the one hand, it is easier for participants to produce their stories because writing reflectively may be a difficult task for some students, especially those who are not used to writing in this way. Researchers on the other hand may find it easy to analyze data because as opposed to free- flowing narrative data, in a narrative

frame, “data are well on the way to being categorized because of the narratively sequenced arrangement of the frame” (Barkhuizen and Wette 2008, p. 381).

Creswell (2014, p. 539) explains that narratives might have the three-dimensional space structure advanced by Clandinin and Comelley (2000) consisting of interaction, continuity, and situation. Interaction is based on an individual’s feelings, hopes, reactions, and points of view. Continuity refers to a consideration of the past remembered experiences, the present story relates to the action of an event and the future experiences by looking at the possible experience and expectations. The third dimension, the situation, gives information about the context of the story being told or the experience being told in terms of time and space.

In the present study, the researcher designed a narrative frame that contains sentence starters and connectives that learners use to fill in their reflections. The narrative frames are designed to understand learners’ experiences of becoming a blended language learner, what has shaped their learning, and what it means to be a blended language learner in relation to their autonomous behavior development. Learners were asked to write brief stories of how they feel about different aspects of their learning process and, in particular, how the transition from classroom to blended learning has changed the way they learn in relation to autonomy. Thus, I choose statement starters depending on the aim of this research to help the students recollect their experiences and provide the researcher with the expected stories. The narrative frame designed in this study has mainly reflected the three-dimensional space narrative structure explained by Creswell (2014), hence the researcher tried to explore the learners’ experiences in the following sequence: starting from the past and moving to the present and looking to the future with a particular focus on the interaction and the situation dimension.

- Exploring their English language learning process in general to gain an insight into their journey with English language learning.
- Exploring learners’ attitudes towards the transition from classroom learning to blended learning in relation to their English language learning process: the first time they started EFL learning in a blended learning context, their attitudes (positive or negative), their motivation towards using technology in their learning.
- Exploring their learning activity in a blended learning context: the way blended learning has affected their learning routines including the content delivery, testing methods, assignment, and the type of activities learners were engaged in.

- Exploring the relationship between blended learning and learners' autonomy: in this section, the researcher designed some prompts to explore how blended learning impacts the learners' autonomous behaviors.
- Explore learners' future expectations. Do they recommend blended learning or not?

As suggested by Barkhuizen (2014), there should be consideration that sufficient space is provided for those who want to write more. Thus, he suggested the use of a narrative empty box (with appropriate prompts). To this end, I have used a narrative empty box that has been adapted from Rohman (2017), however, some changes were made to fulfil the needs of the study. The narrative empty box followed the three-dimensional space narrative structure explained by Creswell (2014) that is used in the main narrative frame. This will help reduce the limitations narrative frames may have on the produced stories in terms of learners who want to write more. However, the use of the narrative empty box is optional. Learners who do not want to write more are not obliged to use it. It is provided to cope with the limitations a structured narrative frame may have.

Within the academic research area, the use of narratives has become an appropriate choice for researchers who adopt a qualitative narrative approach, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert narratives are “situated in a matrix of qualitative research” (p. 3). However, since the idea of using such a research tool is to some extent new in the context where this research is based, I decided to host an online information session that will provide an explanation of this research tool. Therefore, before sending the narrative frames and the narrative empty box, the participants were briefed in an online information session held on the Zoom platform. I have designed a PowerPoint presentation in which I explained what the research is about, what learner stories/ narrative frames are, what they look like, and their research purposes. I have provided learners with some examples of narrative frames. Moreover, I explained to participants what was expected from them as participants in this study with reference to their rights for anonymity and confidentiality. The session had also a Q&A part in which I answered all the questions participants had.

Online Semi-Structured Interviews

Barkhuizen et al. (2014) argue that while narratives are a good form of primary data that provides an initial exploration of the problem, it is more advantageous to combine them with other data collection instruments. Therefore, this research also used follow-up narrative

interviews. Interviews are considered a common data collection tool, and they are defined as an exchange of views about a common subject of interest between the interviewer and the interviewee(s) (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interviews represent one of the best ways to get an in-depth understanding of individuals' beliefs, emotions, and opinions because "the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 2006, p. 9). In this study, I chose to use interviews as a qualitative tool because interviewing is the most appropriate strategy to collect information for a narrative case study research as these later deal with human affairs (Yin 2014). Therefore, it allows me to gain a deep understanding of the Algerian learners' previous language learning experiences and how these experiences build up their learning environment. The interviews will generate data that will determine whether the Algerian learning environment encourages learner autonomy or not. More precisely the interviews will aim at identifying the elements that define the Algerian learners' culture of learning from learners' point of view including their perception of their roles and their teachers' roles, the type of activities they are engaged in, type of assessment, classroom interaction, decisions taking and many others.

As discussed in the literature review, the culture of learning influences learners' behavior in the educational context. Jin and Cortazzi (2013) claim that "members of different cultural communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values, and beliefs about how to learn and how to teach" (p.1). In this conception, the culture of learning consists of specific learning habits about the different ways of learning in terms of the roles of both teachers and learners, classroom interaction, type of activities, and type of assessment. Therefore, taking the elements listed above into consideration will provide justification and guidance for the items and design of the online semi-structured interview.

While the first data collection tool mainly focuses on understanding the experiences of EFL Algerian learners in a blended learning context, the follow-up online semi-structured interview is designed to help understand the extent to which the culture of learning in the Algerian context affects the development of learner autonomy and how has the widespread use of blended technologies as a result of COVID 19 impacted on learning culture and the fostering of autonomy? Mainly the interview is divided into two sections:

'Past learning experience' refers to the learners' experiences before the implementation of

blended learning. It is about the different aspects of learners' language learning process.

'Contemporary experience' refers to learners' experiences after the implementation of blended learning. It is designed to explore how blended learning impacted learners' language learning process generally and their autonomous behaviors.

The following blueprint summarizes the data gathering process by explaining the methods, tools and procedures:

<i>Data</i>	Data Collection Method	Tools	Procedures
Experiences of Algerian EFL Learners	Writing a story by reflecting on their experiences of learning English in a blended learning context.	Narrative frames and narrative empty box	Learners were asked to write brief stories about their blended learning journey by completing narrative frames that contain sentence starters. Learner had also the option to use the narrative empty box that provide more space for additional information.
	Semi-structured online interviews for exploring learners past learning experiences in detail, clarifying unclear stories and confirming the stories written in the frames.	Interview guide	After submitting the narrative frames, participants were invited to participate in online recorded interviews to further discuss their experiences.

Figure 8: Blueprint for Data Collection

4.5.3.2 Pilot Study

Piloting in research studies is strongly recommended as it helps not only in ensuring that the interview questions and tools that the researcher designs work effectively, but also in testing that the data-gathering approach functions well (Bryman 2012). I thus decided to pilot the two phases of my study, namely the narrative frames and the semi-structured interview.

Narrative Frames

The narrative frames were tested with three master's students. They were sent to the gatekeeper who distributed them to the participants. It was the only way that I could find practical as I had

not yet established direct contact with the participants at that stage. The narrative frames were given to the students to be completed at their convenience in terms of time and place. The narrative frames contain sentence starters intended to guide students in recollecting their experiences. The participants were given the choice of either sending the narratives by email or handing them over to the gatekeeper.

The piloting study of this first phase aimed to test the effectiveness and quality of the overall narrative frame design in achieving the research and my objectives. This includes the assessment of the sentence starters' clarity and how well the participants understand and interpret the prompts. Thus, comprehension assessment ensures that sentence starters are clear, straightforward and successfully communicate the intended meaning. Furthermore, piloting the narrative frames helped me to gauge the extent to which the sentence starters stimulate the learners to share the expected experiences and the quality of the data to be collected. Testing the effectiveness of the sentence starters as being a part of the narrative frame which is used as a research instrument in this study, helped me to validate the research instrument as well.

After the pilot study, I analyzed the narrative frames, and I identified several areas for improvement in the main study. Overall, the stories of the participants were to some extent the expected ones. However, some minor modifications were made. First of all, a few sentence starters were totally removed because I noticed that in some sections the participants repeated themselves. I realized the same data were being found in other parts of the narrative frame thus making the data redundant. Furthermore, I assumed that avoiding unnecessary repetition would not only generate focused responses from the participants but also a clear analysis and interpretation of the data. It was important that each sentence starter serves a unique purpose to ensure that the narrative frames generate good quality data and serve their intended purpose. Therefore, the few alterations I made to the final narrative frames were deemed necessary to enhance the clarity and effectiveness of the data collection tool. Finally, using the data from the pilot study, I was able to adjust the narrative frames, particularly in terms of avoiding repetitions, making the data collection tool generate more focused stories, and enhancing the quality of data.

As for the narrative empty box, only one participant used it, but I decided to keep it and use it in the main study as there might be some participants who would find it useful. Overall, the analysis of the pilot study highlighted and verified the feasibility and potential of the narrative

frame as a research instrument. It also demonstrated its appropriateness to serve the research objectives and helped me to answer my research questions. The pilot study has also highlighted the areas that need improvement for the main study (See pilot and final templates in appendices 6 and 8).

Online Semi-Structured Interviews

The online semi-structured interviews were piloted with two master's students enrolled at the Department of English. I shared the interview question guide with the participants two days before the agreed date of the interviews to give learners an idea of what the interviews would be about and their purpose while delineating appropriate ethical procedures. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom; they were audio-recorded, and they took almost one hour and fifteen minutes. The interview questions focused mainly on investigating the learners' experiences in two different settings namely fully face-to-face learning and blended learning. The first part of the interview is about the different aspects of language learning in fully face-to-face learning such as teachers' roles, learners' roles, learners' understanding of language learning autonomy, the assessment procedures, and cultural influences on learner autonomy development. The second part of the interview focuses on how the above-mentioned aspects were affected by the use of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic concerning learner autonomy development.

The main aim of piloting the interview guide was not only to test the effectiveness of the interview questions in attaining the research objectives but also to gauge the interview procedures in general. After conducting the interviews, I analyzed the data focusing on two main aspects: the extent to which the questions were understandable by the participants and pertinent to the research objectives and how well the procedures were. According to the learners' responses, the questions are clear and unambiguous. The interviewees were comfortable and engaged during the interviews. The analysis highlighted also some areas for improvement. I set a time of 45 minutes for each interview, but the piloted interviews exceeded the time indicated. The participants seemed to be bored and tired at some stages. For the main study, I realized the importance of conducting interviews in less time in order to maintain participants' engagement. The participants were also uncomfortable during the interviews because of the time and date they were scheduled. The interviews were scheduled during the days of the week, so the participants did them while they were on campus. Although they chose

an empty classroom, the place was less than ideal due to the noise from the corridors, and interruptions from other students barging in. For the main study, I avoided working days and I asked the students if it was convenient for them to conduct the interviews on weekends while at home. For those who could not make it, I suggested that they look for a quiet place where no one could interrupt. The analysis of the pilot study also revealed that some of the participants' responses were broad, indicating the need for additional probing for some questions to get more detailed responses. I decided therefore to employ some follow-up questions to let learners elaborate further on their experiences and perceptions.

The data obtained from this piloting phase proved useful as they guided me in improving the clarity of the questions, adding some prompts to elicit in-depth experience, improving the flow of the interview, and reducing their duration. These modifications helped me in designing a more effective interview guide for the main study ensuring a good quality of data.

4.5.3.3 Main Study

Narrative Frames

Before sending the main narrative frames, final preparations were made. I reviewed them several times before setting the final format (Appendix 8). Furthermore, due to the unfamiliarity of narrative frames in my research context, I decided to host an online information session on Zoom which was held on December the 2nd 2022. The aim of organizing this session was to explain the research tool. Hence, I designed a PowerPoint presentation in which I explained what the research is about, what narrative frames are, what they look like, and their research purposes. I also showed learners some examples of narrative frames. Moreover, I delineated all attendant ethical procedures, emphasizing their rights to anonymity and confidentiality. Participants had also the chance to ask all the questions they had.

The narrative frames covered several topics, for instance, English language learning experiences, perceptions, activities, blended learning, autonomous learning, and so forth. The sentence starters were grouped and put under these topics and others. I sent the final version of the narrative frames on December the 10th 2022. Thirty EFL learners working across a range of disciplines at the Department of English participated in completing the narrative frames. The participants were given the choice as to when and where to complete the narratives. To ensure that all participants have a clear understanding of the participation, I sent the information sheet along with the consent form to all participants well in advance (see Appendix 4 and 5)

The first phase of data collection took nearly two months. I started receiving the narratives on December 20th and a total of thirty narratives were received by the end of February. In December, more EFL learners were willing to take part in the study compared to those who actually participated but this was due to the period in which the study was conducted. In January, the learners were taking examinations, so they were committed to their exam preparations.

The figure below summarizes the total number of participants:

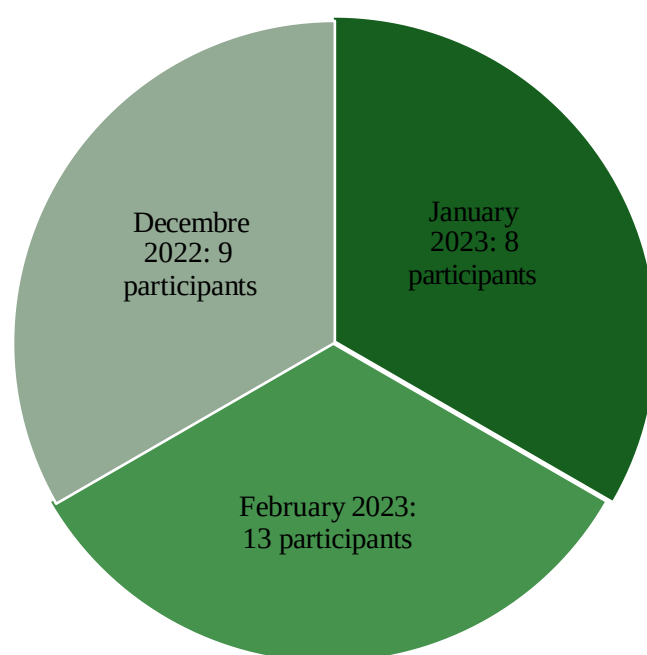


Figure 9: Number of EFL Learners Participating in the Narrative Frames- Main Study

Online Semi-structured Interviews

Before starting to plan for the second phase of data collection which is the follow-up interviews, I did a preliminary analysis of the data that were generated from the learners' narratives. The preliminary analysis served as a valuable step in identifying areas of focus in the second phase. Hence, I took notes about all the things that I needed to investigate in depth to answer my research questions and fulfil my research objectives. The insights gained from the first phase have contributed to the design of a more effective interview guide to further investigate the research topic.

Depending on the findings revealed from the pilot study, final preparations were made. The interview guide was judged by my supervisors and other fellow Ph.D. colleagues. Then I reviewed it many times and finally designed the final format (Appendix 9). The questions investigated different topics such as learners' understanding of learner autonomy, their roles, and their teachers' roles, the type of activities they were engaged in, and many other different aspects of the learners' educational culture. The interviews were mainly divided into two parts. While the first part investigated EFL Algerian learners' English language learning experiences in fully face-to-face learning, the second part investigated how the use of blended learning affects these experiences in relation to their autonomy development. Students' engagement and participation in the interviews were low compared to the first phase. I planned to interview at least eight students, but only five EFL Algerian learners enrolled in a two-year master, program at the Department of English participated. I sent the invitations to take part in the interviews in early April and waited nearly one month and a half, only five gave their consent to participate. I made sure that all the interview preparations were ready such as time, platform, and clear instructions. I also shared in advance a copy of the interview guide with the participants to provide them with a clear picture of the topic that will be discussed. As for the location, I suggested doing the interviews on weekends while the participants were at home to anticipate problems such as interruptions. All the participants were comfortable with the suggestion and the interviews were conducted online on weekends. Furthermore, I ensured that the participants received the information sheet along with the consent form beforehand. The time of the interview was chosen by the participants at their convenience. Besides, to maintain a smooth interview process and give participants more freedom and flexibility, participants had the option to talk either in Tamazight, Arabic, French, or English.

The interviews were conducted in one month; this is shown in the following figure

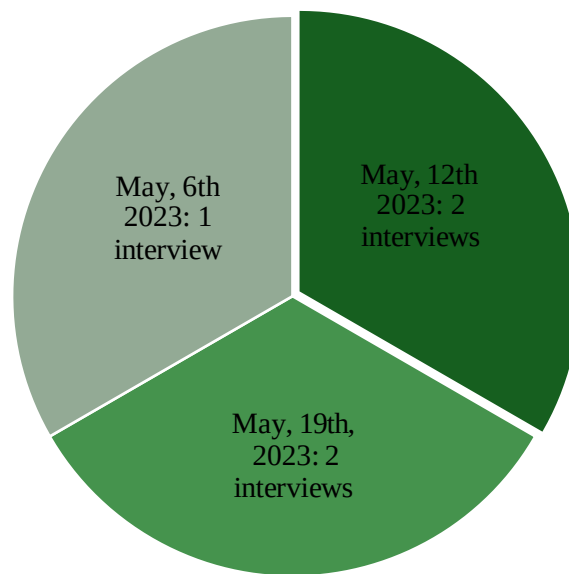


Figure 10: The Number of Interviews Conducted Over the Month of May

The key questions and the basic layout of the interviews were used with all the participants. However, with each interview different follow-up questions were used. If an important point comes up that I thought would be relevant and useful to the research, I would add a prompt or a follow-up question to gain detailed information.

4.5.4 Step Four: Re-story and Retell the Learners' Stories

This section will retell the learners' stories as data and will present the analytical framework employed in this study, detailing the process of data transcribing, themes, and code generation as well as the analysis approach.

4.5.4.1 My Analytical Framework

The research study in hand is narrative. Therefore, all the data gathered are of a qualitative nature. Benson (2014) argues that studies using analysis of narratives are valid research approaches because they draw on established methods of qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis can be done in several ways, and the chosen method depends on the type of data and the researcher's objectives. They both inform how the data will be analyzed and how the analysis will be interpreted (Cohen et al. 2007). Hence, no single or well-established method is followed to perform the analysis (Bryman 2012). Some commonly used approaches are

content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, conversation analysis, and thematic analysis. The choice of the best method to employ therefore requires careful consideration of various factors. As suggested by Cohen et al (2007), the researcher should consider the principle of “fitness for purpose”. This means that the researcher makes informed decisions depending on his research objectives and his research questions. I thus assumed that thematic data analysis is deemed to be preferable in this study. Details of the rationale are presented in the following sections.

I have elaborated in the previous sections that researchers’ philosophical positions influence their methodological choices and likewise, they do with their data analysis approach. In this regard, Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that “researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (p.84). This means that our perception of the nature of reality and whether we discover, interpret, or construct realities and knowledge influence our choices not only in terms of methodological decisions but also of methods of analysis. For example, in research adopting a positive paradigm in which knowledge is discovered, data analysis is objective and aims at finding and discovering the truths that already exist in the data. Researchers must be objective and avoid influencing the analysis and interpretation of data. However, an analysis based on interpretivist epistemology appraises the researcher’s interpretation of data and participants’ views. Temple and Young (2004) confirm this and state that based on their personal experiences and identities, researchers influence the process of analysis and interpretation. From an interpretivist stance, reality is multiple, and individuals perceive and interpret reality differently making their experiences unique and personal (Gibbs 2007). The analysis should thus strive to accurately reflect participants’ constructions of knowledge from their perspectives. However, the researchers’ understanding of the topic, knowledge construction, and their experiences will play a significant role in shaping the final outcome of the analysis. Hence, the researcher must hold an ethical commitment to interpreting the participants’ perspectives faithfully and avoiding any conflict between their own views and those of the participants.

The analytical framework I adopted was thus guided by my philosophical position as a researcher, namely my epistemological and ontological positions (see details in section 4.2) which are based on interpretivism. Based on the claim that all qualitative studies are interpretive

(Cohen et al 2007) and being a qualitative data analyst who operates within the interpretive paradigm, I consider myself to be actively but cautiously involved in giving meaning and interpreting the participants' social world and experiences. Participants have unique experiences to which they attach their own meaning and interpretation. My role is to understand and interpret these meanings to gain insight into the social phenomenon under study. These interpretations are therefore shaped by my own experience in the social context and the process of understanding the phenomenon and reality is co-constructed between myself, the participants, and the context. This means that data are interpreted in relation to the broader social and cultural context and in relation to my interpretation within the social world. My interpretation is not only influenced by my knowledge of the context but also by my understanding of the research topic and the individuals being studied. I constantly moved back and forth between the data, emerging insights, and existing literature and theoretical framework to make sense of the data. Therefore, I do not adhere to the positivist epistemology which sees the researcher's role as giving the participants a voice but rather I am actively engaged in a dialogue with the data, looking for multiple perspectives and interpretations. My role as a researcher in this study is to interpret the multiple realities and interpretations embedded in the qualitative data gathered from the narrative frames and interviews, acknowledging my own subjectivity in the process of knowledge construction while striving for a deeper and authentic understanding of participants' perspective and the social phenomenon being researched.

In terms of the methods adopted for analysis, I believe in Cohen et al.'s (2006) view that the method should fit the researcher's purpose in terms of what he wants to know and achieve. As for the role of theory in the analysis, my approach is predominantly inductive. The data guided the analysis and themes and codes emerged from the data contributing to new knowledge and theories construction. However, there are elements of a deductive approach in my analysis as well aimed at confirming and supporting some assumptions, beliefs, and existing theories concerning learner autonomy such as Palfreyman's (2014) metaphor of the learning situation as an ecological system and other common beliefs concerning the notion of learner autonomy in the Algerian EFL environment.

4.5.4.1.1 Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis is one way of analyzing qualitative data emerging from narratives, interview transcripts, focus group descriptions, or any written data; and it is one of the most

methods applied to qualitative data (Bryman 2012) as well as to narrative studies especially in the applied linguistic field (Ghanbar et al. 2024). It involves the identification and categorization of codes, themes, or patterns within the data to gain insight into the underlying meaning and experiences described by participants. The researcher needs to have a particular method or systematic way to perform the analysis to get the desired results because to obtain meaningful and valuable results from qualitative studies, the material being examined must be analyzed systematically and methodologically (Attride-Stirling 2001). For this reason, I selected the thematic analysis as a method to interpret my data, fulfil my research objectives, and answer my research questions. I was engaged in the analysis to identify and unearth themes that were salient in my narrative data, and which will help in understanding the social phenomenon being studied.

Latent and Semantic Thematic Analysis

I stated in the previous section that the adopted methods of analysis depend on the aims of the research and the specific research questions the researchers want to answer. Through this study I aim to develop a better understanding of the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment in the higher education context, the influence of their past learning experiences on the development of their autonomy, and how the implementation of blended learning as a result of COVID 19 has changed their learning culture/habits and their autonomy development. Accordingly, the type of analysis required should move from the semantic level in which analysis focuses on what participants explicitly state to the interpretive level and explore the latent and deep meanings. Braun and Clarke (2006) made a clear distinction between the analysis performed at semantic and latent levels. They are both methods to perform a qualitative thematic analysis. However, they differ in focus and approach and even in interpretation. At the semantic level, the themes are generated by examining the explicit content and meaning of the narrative data. The aim is to understand the surface-level meaning by emphasizing what the participants explicitly stated using some words and phrases. Whereas the latent analysis explores the underlying or hidden themes within the narrative data and goes beyond the explicit content to uncover the subjective experiences and perspectives embedded within the data. Accordingly, it can be noted that thematic semantic analysis comes before and paves the way for latent analysis. Therefore, I had to perform both because the latter depends on the former, even if the latent analysis is more pertinent to the aim of this study, the analysis I carried out looked for an in-depth understanding and interpretation of participants' subjective

experiences and perspectives depending on their discourses and articulations of those experiences. I started analyzing the data immediately after receiving each narrative frame from my participants at a semantic level; I was eager to read each narrative and reflect on each participant's story highlighting what each participant had said. It is argued that starting data analysis earlier influences positively the research design and improves the effectiveness of subsequent phases of data collection (Bryman 2012). On this issue, Gibbs (2007) explained that data collection and analysis interact repeatedly as early analysis informs other stages of data gathering. The early initial reflection and analysis I carried on my data, directed the design of the next data collection tool namely interviews. From an early stage, I started thinking about the topics that should be explored in the second phase. Moving from the semantic level of analysis to the latent level, such initial reflection was useful for it paved the way to the next stage of analysis in which I analyzed the hidden meaning behind what my participants have said. I was able to reflect on and observe how my participants were attempting to give meaning to interpret and construct their world by describing their English language learning experiences in blended learning. Moreover, I started to give meaning to their experiences by noticing some emerging patterns and concerns in my data. I also began to notice that each story was unique in the sense that each participant used his own style, degree of formality, dialect, and different ways of describing their experiences. This gave me the impression that each story is interesting and would give a unique dimension to my data.

4.5.4.2 Transcribing

Before the actual analysis stage, some data needed to be prepared, namely transcribing the semi-structured interviews. Data transcription is among the most important steps in the data analysis process. I view it as a difficult task and a critical phase because when transcribing, researchers change the spoken dialogue to a typed transcript. This raises concerns regarding interpretation, accuracy, and fidelity (Gibbs 2007). According to Gibbs, the concern is not about the transcript being entirely accurate, however, it is about whether the transcription captures some specific aspects of the interview.

Being aware of some of the inherent ethical issues surrounding transcription, I decided to carry out a manual data transcription. Furthermore, I believe that the process of transcribing the data is an interpreting process in itself, therefore, it was important for me to listen to the interviews many times before starting to transcribe them helping me to get a holistic picture of each interview and have insight into the learners' voices and experiences. Moreover, to keep a good

and accurate record of the interviews, I followed each completed interview by transcribing it as details were fresh in my mind. Along with the recording, I also took note of any behavior or speaking tone that might be of interest during the analysis process. The manual transcription has therefore allowed a closer engagement with my data and an early identification of emerging themes from transcription, thus engaging me in an early data analysis process. Furthermore, it has been argued that the transcription of one's own data is in itself an initial step of data analysis (Gibbs 2007) because careful listening to the recording allows the researcher to be familiar with the context. Although data transcription may seem a time-consuming task (Bryman 2012), I decided to carry out a full transcription of the data rather than a selective transcription which may ignore some important parts of the interviews. Such a decision is informed by what serves my research purposes and interests. The main aim of my research is to capture the Algerian EFL learners' experiences in fully face-to-face and blended learning contexts in relation to their autonomy development, therefore I needed a detailed copy of what was said in the interviews. Each small detail is considered important and carries valuable information and would help me in establishing an authentic account of the participants' experiences.

Additionally, although participants were given the opportunity to use a language of their choice namely, Berber, Arabic, French, or English during the interviews, they all opted to conduct the interviews in English. Occasionally, they would encounter a word or phrase that they found challenging to express in English. In such instances, participants would briefly switch to their native language to ask how to say the term in English before continuing the discussion in English. Therefore, no translation of data was necessary. Besides, the narrative frames contain some spelling, grammatical, and accuracy errors. However, I chose to keep them as they appear in the participants' responses to preserve the authenticity and integrity of the data and ensure that participants' voices were represented accurately without modifications. I acknowledge the importance of rigor in qualitative research; therefore, I accept these language errors as part of the original expression of participants' perspectives.

4.5.4.3 Coding

By the time I prepared all my written data generated by the narrative frames and the online semi-structured interviews, it was time to get more familiar with the data and start the analysis. The very first stage I engaged in was breaking down and coding my data. A code is typically a word or a phrase that is used to assign descriptive meaning to and represent a group of language-

based data (Saldana 2012; Creswell 2014). It is about highlighting what parts of data are being analyzed by indexing and labelling some passages of the textual data that generally belong to or refer to the same descriptive data (Gibbs 2007). Therefore, codes represent a collection of ideas, opinions, and topics addressed by participants and have been considered by the researcher meaningful and interesting to the analysis (Saldana 2012; Braun and Clarke 2006). It is worth mentioning that codes and themes are not synonymous as discussed in some writings. However, codes are more limited in scope than themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Codes represent the most basic unit of analysis in which specific labels are assigned to a segment of data. At a later stage, different related codes are combined together into one theme. Simply, while codes are the individual labels used to define segments of data, themes are the larger patterns that emerge from analyzing, synthesizing, and grouping these codes.

To start generating codes, I read my data repeatedly to be more familiar with it. As for the coding process itself, I decided to use Microsoft Word. The characteristics of Microsoft words such as the text highlight colors have helped me in highlighting and cutting up some important passages of the text. I also used the comment function to write my reflections including the codes in the right section. It was also possible and easy to reverse in case of any mistakes. Besides, other editing functions in Microsoft Word were also practical because they saved me time and effort in generating the codes including copy and paste, cut, replace, and find, and many others. Therefore, these Microsoft Word functions were sufficient tools that were needed to complete the coding process. They were not only practical but also helpful.

As discussed above, I chose to manually conduct the coding and analysis without the need to resort to any analysis software such as NVIVO. This decision was influenced by many factors. One key factor was that, given the specific quality and nature of the analysis I intended to perform, I did not think that using such software would be useful. I wanted to explore the underlying meaning and themes within the data and go beyond the explicit content to uncover the subjective experiences of Algerian EFL learners that were embedded within the data (see details in the analysis approach discussed above). I have then assumed that this level and nature of analysis could not be handled by such software and machines. Gibbs (2007) argued that while these software packages may help in preparing, indexing, summarizing, and reporting the data, they could neither carry out the reflection and thinking processes on behalf of the researchers nor perform the reading and interpretation tasks. Secondly, I am convinced that in

such processes as data analysis human intelligence is needed and software like NVIVO cannot replace it. While doing the analysis, I was not analyzing at the surface level, I was rather giving meaning to learners' experiences by recognizing the different themes that participants may express in different ways, in different language styles, and in different articulations and word choices.

Therefore, the mechanical data analysis performed by these software packages cannot do this kind of analysis on behalf of the researcher. Wellington (2000) supported this idea and argued that humans play important roles in discovering patterns within the data and identifying contrasts and contradictions. That is to say that software and machines "cannot replace the researchers' own analysis, intuition, and craftsmanship" (p.147). In conclusion, I consider handling these software packages a time-consuming task therefore instead of investing my time in learning how to use this analysis software, it would rather be more practical and useful for me to spend my time reading, familiarizing myself with, and reflecting on my data. Simply computers are unable to perform the analytical abilities of humans or researchers in this context. This means that computers can help in coding and identifying themes, but they cannot provide us with the analysis, especially for researchers who are attempting to interpret data from a particular contextual perspective.

As for the codes, Barkhuizen et al. (2014) highlighted that during data analysis, researchers should emphasize the principle of emergence. Codes, categories, and themes ideally should emerge through the researchers' "hard, often creative and interpretative work" (Barkhuizen, et al. 2014, p. 73). However, the idea of emergent here does not imply that themes and codes are free-floating ready to be captured during the analysis (Zacharias 2016). Instead, as Pavlenko (2007) argues, researchers need to formulate a theoretical framework to guide the identification of potential themes. This is referred to as prefigured themes (Creswell 2007). They help researchers in the data analysis process and act as a lens through which data can be read and interpreted. However, while these themes offer valuable guidance, researchers should not treat them as "straightjackets but rather as suggestions" (Zacharias 2016, p. 110). They should not restrict the analytical process and should remain open to new themes and categories that were not initially anticipated but may arise during data collection or analysis. Such an approach informs the data analysis without influencing the outcome of the analysis.

Therefore, the codes that were used to categorize my data are both descriptive and conceptual

or priori coding (Ryan and Bernard 2003, Wellington, 2000) or as called by Creswell (2007) prefigured. Descriptive coding refers to the codes that emerge from the data (Punch 2005). On the one hand, some of the generated codes were mainly formed from the data by recognizing the recurring trends in participants' responses. On the other hand, some of the generated codes were also derived from my own understanding of the topic "learner autonomy", my own experience in the context under study, the guiding questions of the research, and the literature. This approach is known as "priori coding"; it is about bringing some codes to the data.

After creating the list of codes, they were co-judged by one of my fellow Ph.D. colleagues and my supervisors. I edited the list by changing and reorganizing the codes. I reviewed the lists of codes several times by comparing and contrasting them and produced a comprehensive list for further analysis. Furthermore, in order to maintain consistency, I created a code manual as suggested by Saldana (2012) and Aljaser (2015) in Microsoft Word format that describes each code and its relationship with the research questions (See code manual in Appendix 10).

4.5.4.4 Themes Generation

I used the code manual as a guide to categorize and group the codes into related themes, with the aim of recognizing patterns and identifying the emerging themes within the data (Punch 2005). Corbin and Strauss (2014) suggested two techniques for an easy transition from the process of coding to theme identification. The researcher has to find out the conceptual patterns by combining the open codes with the data as a whole; then he identifies the main themes by making an overall judgment on the whole data. Accordingly, from the codes I was able to draw broader themes that were examined in relation to my research questions, literature about learning autonomy, and the context under study. The list of the major themes was checked and refined several times. These themes were judged whether they were "analytically useful, conceptually coherent, empirically relevant and practically applicable" (Richards, 2003, p. 276). As the process of reflecting on my list of themes went on, I noticed that the categorized major themes started to branch out into some subcategories or sub-themes. Therefore, there was a need for a second categorization. Below is a visual explanation of the stages followed to code my data and identify the themes.

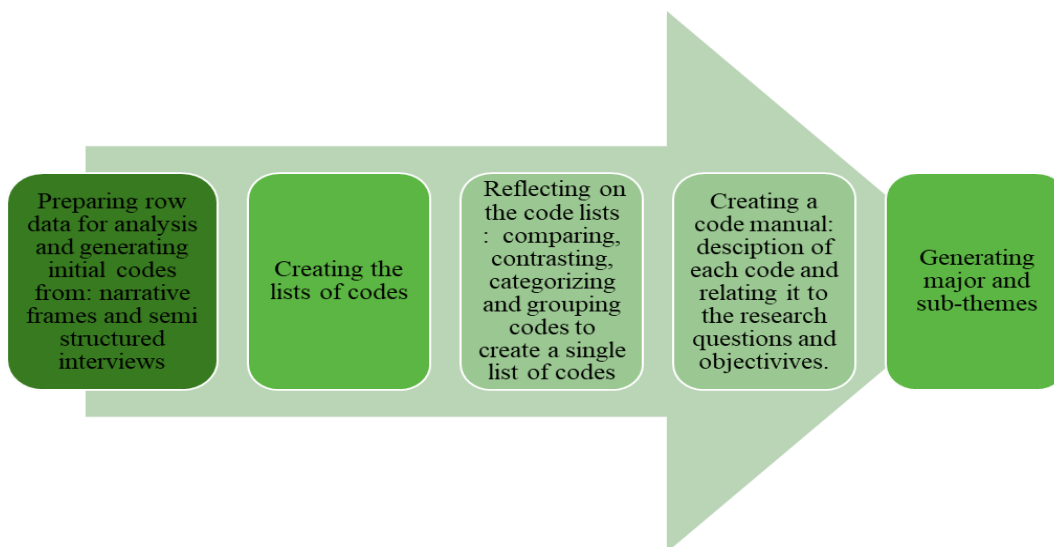


Figure 11: Stages of the Coding Process

Once the themes were finalized, I had to review them and ensure that they authentically represent learners' stories. At a later stage, I systematically analyzed and organized the themes in relation to the research questions of the current study. To do this I had to move back and forth between the data, their codes, and the generated themes. Such an approach was essential to ensure that the analysis I performed, and the coding process I carried out aligned with the objectives of the research. To systematize this process further, I developed a blueprint for theme organization, which outlines the relationship between each theme, the specific research question it addresses, the source of data, and the main findings. Further details can be found in Appendix 11.

4.5.5 Step Five: Reporting Findings

This step refers to the time for reporting the findings. Themes are often placed at the beginning of the finding sections in narrative studies. However, there is no universally established way or approach to organizing and presenting the reports. In the current study, I structured the report to provide a comprehensive account of learners' experiences in the Algerian EFL context. Given the quality and quantity of data gathered, the report is divided into four chapters, each organized around one main theme as the chapter heading. The subthemes are then presented

throughout the sections of these chapters and are often supported by relevant textual excerpts from the data. Therefore, chapters five, six, seven, and eight will present and discuss the findings. As for the sequence of presenting the themes, they were guided by the research questions.

The first section of each chapter will be dedicated to presenting participants' voices with minimal interpretation. This approach reflects my commitment to privilege participants' views and making their voices heard. While some references to related studies and literature are made where necessary, I will avoid much distraction from the literature at that stage. This approach also aligns with the principles put forward by Wellington (2000), who suggests that when reporting and writing findings, two main criteria should be considered namely paying attention to details and privileging the participants' voices. Therefore, the analysis will detail what the participants mentioned in the narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. Direct excerpts from both narrative frames and interviews will be presented appropriately to support what is being discussed using the participants' exact words and expressions. In doing so, I emphasize participants' views and perceptions, where in Lamb's terms (2005) each expression or view expresses a voice, a form of knowledge. The second section of each chapter will focus on interpreting, commenting on, contextualizing, and theorizing the findings. The discussion sections will wrap up all the obtained findings into comprehensive arguments about learner autonomy in the EFL context of Algeria. Hence, the findings are interpreted in the context of the existing literature, theories, and conceptual frameworks (See the detailed report of findings in chapters five, Six, Seven, and eight). The following model represents the structure of the finding chapters:

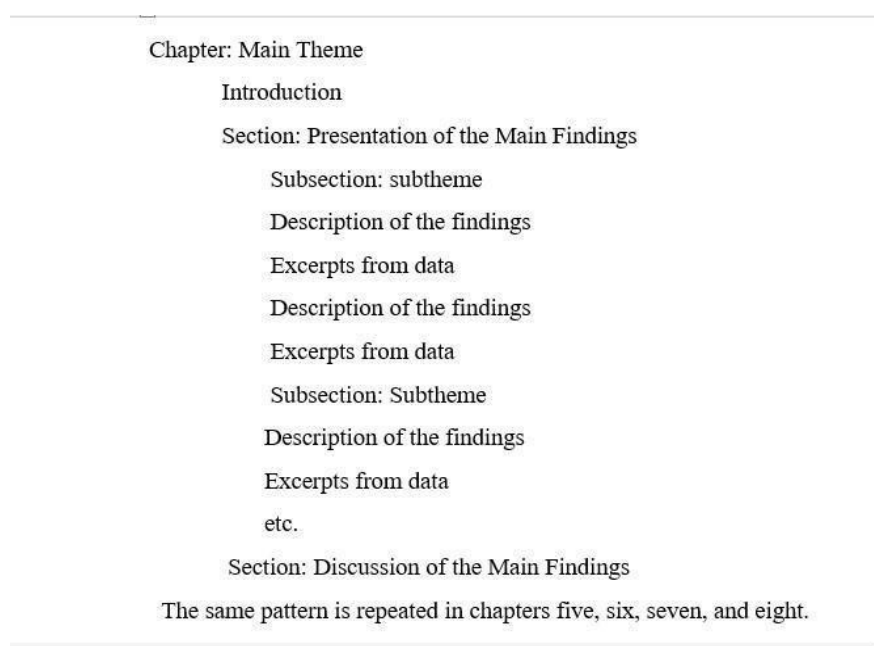


Figure 12: Structure of the Finding Chapters

Overall, such a structured presentation allows for a clear illustration of the results and findings, prioritizes the voices of the participants, and emphasizes their perspectives as well as experiences. It also allows for privileging the data as well as their uniqueness and strength, highlighting the importance of giving learners opportunities to make their voices heard in the investigated context.

4.5.6 Step Six: Validating the Accuracy of Reports

The trustworthiness, accuracy, and credibility of reports are the essence of any investigation. Therefore, researchers should be aware that this has direct implications for the validity of their findings as well as the quality of the research study. Being aware of these issues, throughout the current study, I used different strategies to maximize the reliability and credibility of my study. Thus, I explained all the procedures I adopted along with explicitly voicing my rationale behind each decision to ensure transparency. According to Flick (2007):

Transparency becomes relevant in several ways for enhancing the quality of qualitative research. Transparency means in general to make the research process in its steps and in the decisions that influenced how data and results were produced understandable to readers in the broadest sense (p. 137).

Since the current study adopted a qualitative narrative approach which is believed to allow me to have a deep understanding of Algerian EFL experiences in an authentic natural setting, I

have thus applied triangulation when adopting research methods to ensure trustworthiness while collecting data. Triangulation involves the use of different sources of data to confirm data. By using data collection techniques namely narrative frames and in-depth follow-up online semi-structured interviews, EFL Algerian learners were allowed to share their experiences in learning the English language at university in a blended learning environment and how this impacted their autonomous behaviors. Besides, they were able to voice their perception of their educational culture and its influence on their autonomy development in a one-to-one follow-up online semi-structured interview. Thus, triangulation enhances the credibility of the study and provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Following data collection, a detailed account of the research design, data collection instruments and procedures, and data analysis was provided highlighting the steps taken at each stage as this enhances transparency and allows the readers to access credibility. Explanations and rationales of both methodology and analysis choices and decisions were also provided which would surely ensure the quality of the data. Furthermore, Zacharias (2016) advised that to achieve data trustworthiness in narrative studies, it is important for researchers to seek member validation. Therefore, to judge how well the data analysis was I engaged two participants and sought their feedback on the interview transcript and themes generated (findings). The two participants were given the chance to read the interview transcripts, and the themes generated from both the narrative frames and the interviews and comment on anything that would not represent their perspective. All the participants validated my interpretation, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately portrayed. I also discussed every single step and decision informing my research with my supervisors and I was seeking feedback from them continuously. Furthermore, I sought feedback from some of my fellow Ph.D. students and I discussed with them different aspects of my research to enhance my knowledge, get critical feedback and alternative viewpoints, and avoid any bias.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Research involving human participants should observe some ethical practices. An increasing number of studies highlight the significance of being aware of and recognizing ethical issues when conducting social research. For instance, Cohen et al (2007) argue that ethical concerns might arise at any stage of social research, and they vary based on the nature of the research topic and the data collection methods used. Moreover, Bryman (2012) states that it is important

for researchers to be aware of these ethical issues because they have a direct impact on research integrity. A wide range of ethical considerations have been discussed in the literature. However, there is agreement upon some principles which are summarized as a) the study should be worthwhile, ensuring that it does not place undue burdens on participants, b) participation must be voluntary and be based on informed consent, ensuring that it is free from coercion and pressure, c) efforts should be made to avoid adverse consequences and negative outcomes from taking part should be explained, finally, d) confidentiality and anonymity of participants must be maintained and respected throughout the study (Webster et al 2014, p. 78). Therefore, the participants must be fully informed about all aspects of the study, their roles, and their rights to anonymity and confidentiality. Participants must also be informed that participation is voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw or refuse participation. The researcher is thus responsible for translating such principles into detailed decisions that fit his choices in terms of methodology, the nature of the research problem, and the circumstances of his research. Every research is unique and operates within some particular contextual background. Therefore, the researcher should observe the ethical issues that might arise at any stage during his research. This is reflected in Webster et al. (2014) description of an ethical researcher as

Being able to anticipate what might arise but also to respond to the unexpected, working in a thoughtful and reflective way. It means developing an ethical conscience that puts participants' interests at the heart of decision-making.

(p. 87).

Reflecting on the ethical application process undertaken for this study, invaluable insights were gained concerning the importance of being aware of the potential ethical issues in research. While going through the application process, I deeply understood the significance of ensuring, for example, participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, I addressed ethical concerns throughout the study and the following sections will present all the measures taken which have informed the ethical framework of this study and prove my commitment to conducting responsible and ethically grounded research.

4.6.1 Measures Taken

The following measures were taken following the guidelines of good research practices defined by the University of Limerick and literature. Firstly, my ethics application underwent rigorous assessment by my supervisors on multiple occasions. Subsequently, ethical approval for my research was granted by the AHSS Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick,

(reference 2022-06-19-AHSS). Formal permission to access the research location and sample was sought by sending a formal recruitment email to my gatekeeper and potential participants. Importantly, this email was assessed and approved by both my supervisors and the Research Ethics Committee.

Additionally, I ensured transparency by disclosing my identity to both the gatekeeper and the participants. Furthermore, all participants were carefully asked for their consent and were made aware of what they were committing themselves to. The EFL learners who took part in this research were initially contacted by a gatekeeper (lecturer at the university where this study was conducted), and then by the researcher (See section 4.7.1.2). At all times, the participants were fully informed of ethical issues and gave their consent to participate in the study; they were also assured that there was no pressure on them to participate (see details in Appendix 5). Besides, to provide comprehensive information, a concise and clear participants' information sheet was prepared, detailing the aims, methods, and ethical considerations such as anonymity and confidentiality; it was written in English and in an easy language style to facilitate understanding (see Appendix 4). This sheet underwent a thorough review by both my supervisors and the Research Ethics Committee. Finally, I upheld the integrity of my research by conducting procedures accurately, appropriately, and rigorously.

4.6.1.1 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Anonymity and confidentiality are also necessary for ethical and good research practice. This includes not disclosing who participated in the study and not discussing what they said in a way that could identify their profiles and identities (Webster et al 2014). The researcher should ensure that participants' anonymity is maintained at all times and during all the research stages from data collection to data analysis and discussion and future publications. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality in my research, the information sheet and consent form contain a clear statement of participants' rights to anonymity. Furthermore, the profiles, identities, specializations, and gender of all participants were kept anonymous. Hence, the pseudonymization strategy was used in the analysis and reporting of data. The real names of participants were replaced by other pseudonyms. To preserve cultural authenticity while protecting the participants' identity, I randomly selected some common names in Algeria (see full list of names in Appendix 12). Moreover, I personally analyzed and coded the data. My focus was on what was said rather than who said what.

Furthermore, the name of the higher education institution where this study was conducted has been replaced by “Northern University” to protect its identity. However, as my research is an narrative exploratory case study, it was important to provide context regarding the language learning and teaching situation. I described the relevant details about Northern University in Chapter One section 1.2. This will allow a better understanding of the background and context of the case while maintaining the confidentiality of the actual institution.

4.6.1.2 Access

In ethical research, gaining access to a research location before starting data collection is indeed important. According to Cohen et al. (2007), permission from relevant authorities must be sought because access is not an absolute right for the researcher and cannot be guaranteed. In order to conduct this study, gaining access to the participants was a crucial step. Prior to data collection, permission was sought at different levels from different authorities. As a postgraduate student at the University of Limerick, Ireland, I first engaged in a formal application process, which was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Limerick. My application was approved without amendments. After receiving approval in June, the next hurdle that needed to be cleared was gaining access to participants and research sites. I contacted the lecturers working at the Department of English at Northern University, Algeria using an official recruitment e-mail (see Appendix 2). However, after a waiting time of nearly two months, I did not get any return. As the gatekeepers could determine the progress of my research and their contribution was valuable, I sent a gentle reminder, and I received a green light from one of the lecturers. The gatekeeper forwarded the documentation I attached to the recruitment e-mail to EFL students enrolled in the two-year EFL master’s program at Northern University and I invited them to take part in the study. Learners who agreed to take part were then invited to an online information session which was held on Zoom. I thus embarked on the process of data gathering and the steps I went through enhanced the quality of my research and ensured ethical conduct.

4.7 Key Features of the Research Design

Key criteria for assessing the effectiveness of qualitative research approaches (of which narrative inquiry is one approach) include credibility, researchers’ subjectivity, reflexivity, and data adequacy (Mwita 2022; Ghanbar et al. 2024). Therefore, researchers should be cautious

when using this approach and implement strategies to prevent these potential challenges from hindering them from achieving their research objectives. They should ensure that findings are both credible and academically rigorous. With this in mind, I aimed to adhere to these principles by adopting a research design that is rigorous and reflexive, yet flexible. I explain in the following paragraph, the several measures I employed to strengthen the trustworthiness and reflexivity of my research.

First, before starting data collection, I organized an online information session which was held on ZOOM to build a rapport with participants. I aimed to create a welcoming atmosphere where participants felt comfortable to ask questions about any aspect of the research process and my role as a researcher. During the same session, I reassured participants that their responses and reflections would not be judged as “correct” or “incorrect”, encouraging open and uninhibited responses. This has added depth and quality to the data. To further enhance the accuracy, clarity, and depth of participants’ answers, I informed them that they were welcome to ask for clarification on any concepts, issues, or questions that seemed unclear.

Furthermore, during the interviews, I avoided interpreting participants’ phrasing such as “teachers take control of everything”, and “I want to learn in a different way”, instead I encouraged them to further explain their intended meaning. Besides, to avoid imposing my own assumptions, I refrained from suggesting some interpretation on some issues, opting instead to ask clarifying questions like, “What do you mean by being more independent?”, rather than offering a predetermined interpretation and asking, “Do you mean that being independent means X”.

Additionally, my position as an external researcher, unaffiliated with the university where this study took place, might have given participants more comfort and eliminated any hesitation in raising concerns about their language learning context. This allowed for more honest responses. I also encouraged participants to write reflections that genuinely represent their own experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, following Bryman’s (2012) suggestion on maximizing respondent validation, I reviewed each participant’s narrative frame well in advance of their interviews to confirm, clarify, or correct my understanding of their reflections. This overall approach contributed to the trustworthiness of the data by ensuring an accurate representation of participants’ perspectives.

The research design I adopted was carefully selected to enhance the overall quality, credibility,

and rigor of my study. Several characteristics of the qualitative narrative approach supported these objectives. First, the chosen research design aligned well with my epistemological and ontological perspectives, reflecting my beliefs on how knowledge and reality can be discovered. Moreover, the data collection tools I used offered substantial flexibility in conducting this research. They allowed participants to provide detailed explanations because they were not confined to a specific limit on what to respond to and allowed me to observe and identify issues not initially thought of and anticipated in the inception stage of the study. The chosen tools were designed to be flexible and adaptable, accommodating the available resources and time limitations of the research. Besides, the research design was tailored to the level, expectations, and unique context of my participants, enabling me to collect in-depth, authentic, and detailed information that enriched my understanding of the research topic. Therefore, the collected data were relevant to my research questions and aligned well with my research's aims. Furthermore, the qualitative narrative approach, specifically the use of narrative frames and semi-structured online interviews, allowed me to have direct contact with participants, which deepened my insights into the genuine feelings and experiences. As Mwita (2022) suggests, the qualitative narrative approach delves into the magnitude of the research problem through participants' narratives, making it possible to capture their anger, happiness, attitudes, and perceptions effectively through qualitative data collection tools. Besides, allowing participants to reflect on their own experiences would hopefully promote their self-awareness regarding both the process of English language learning and the overall learning environment. The research design further prioritized researcher objectivity through a strong emphasis on reflexivity throughout the research process. Importantly, this research design is also feasible, replicable, and adaptable, making it suitable for researchers in various contexts. I think that the integration of all ethical considerations helped maintain the credibility, flexibility, interactivity, and strength of the research design.

4.8 Research Design Limitations

Every research has its limitations. It is indeed important to describe the limitations of the research to help the audience understand the context and constraints within which the study was conducted. In the first place, my study primarily employs a qualitative narrative approach and instead of emphasizing quantity, it mainly focuses on the depth and quality of learners' reflections. Hence the generalization of the findings may not be possible with a sample size of

only thirty participants. However, it is important to emphasize that qualitative research does not aim to generalize its findings rather, it typically focuses on smaller samples to elucidate the particular (Creswell 2014) and provide an in-depth exploration of a given research problem. On this point, Ghanbar et al. (2024) argue that it is not appropriate to judge narrative inquiry research using the criteria of “post-positivist” paradigms. According to them, this is like “comparing apples with oranges” (p. 1652) because while post positivism emphasizes measurable, replicable and generalizable results, narrative inquiry highlights individuals’ experiences and contextual meaning. Therefore, qualitative research should be evaluated using some criteria that are suited to its qualitative nature.

Furthermore, I am aware that adopting a narrative framework for data collection to data analysis introduces some degree of subjectivity inherent to studies of this nature. However, as discussed in the previous section and section (4.3), I carefully managed and controlled my influence on the research process, and I strongly believe that the findings authentically reflect the experiences of Algerian EFL learners. The focus and aims of this exploratory study were to examine, analyze, and provide a deep understanding of these experiences. Therefore, the insights revealed in this study remain true to participants’ perspectives.

Additionally, I was aware that learners might face difficulties in reflecting on and discussing their language learning experiences, given that many may not have previously engaged in such reflective tasks. To address this, I decided to organize an online information session, where I explained the task to the participants and encouraged them to include all aspects, they felt represented their experiences. I thus, approach each participant’s responses both written as in the narrative frames and spoken as in the interview, as valuable and useful insights that would contribute meaningfully to a better understanding of the research problem.

Perhaps another limitation lies in the number of interviews conducted. To further investigate the emerging themes from narrative frames, I designed an interview guide based on the identified themes and categories. However, only a limited number of learners volunteered to participate, resulting in just five conducted interviews. With a larger number of participants, the data would have been enriched, and the interpretation and the discussion of the findings would have been enhanced. The last limitation is the extensive volume of data generated by narrative frames. Analyzing such huge data requires time, rendering the whole process tedious and potentially discouraging researchers.

To conclude, despite its limitations, qualitative narrative research remains a valuable approach, especially for understanding how people truly feel and experience specific phenomena. The qualitative narrative approach I adopted in the study helped me address research questions that quantitative methods might overlook, as individuals' personal stories and narratives offer insights into their emotions and experiences that cannot be quantified (Mwita 2022). This makes qualitative research essential for uncovering people's perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs in a way that other methods cannot achieve.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined and rationalized my theoretical stances and research design choices. It began with a summary of essential philosophical issues and research traditions related to social science research. Then it highlighted my ontological and epistemological assumptions in this study, and how they influenced my methodological and analytical choices. The chapter also described how access to the research site was obtained and how ethical issues were considered such as ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants.

The overall research methodology employed in this study adopts a qualitative research design, aligning with my ontological and epistemological positions and embracing constructivist and interpretive principles. These philosophical and theoretical foundations informed not only the research's overall design but also the selection of narrative frames and online semi-structured interviews as data collection methods, as well as the approaches employed for data analysis.

Special attention is devoted also to my role as an insider within the research environment, as I share similar cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds with the participants. Acknowledgment of these considerations has helped in creating context-sensitive methodologies for authentically capturing participant experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension of the data.

Finally, after documenting different resources to write this chapter, I have developed a critical knowledge of different research methodologies and more particularly of narrative inquiries and narrative frames as an important tool within this research tradition. Besides, I have developed an interest in qualitative research methods, and I am optimistic about being able to share this expertise with the broader academic community through conference presentations, article publications, and lecturing engagements in the future.

Chapter Five: Blended Learning Experiences: Insights into Learners of English as a Foreign Language Learning Experiences

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how learners perceive English language learning in a blended learning environment. It aims to uncover the various attitudes and perceptions that shape learners' experiences and approaches to language learning within this context. When designing the narrative frames, I assumed that learners' perceptions and attitudes are influenced by their past and current learning experiences. The experiences that the students had had in the past would shape their current experiences with blended learning. As such, I see that it is useful to investigate first their attitudes and perceptions to understand how their experiences have evolved over time in different learning contexts. The first part of the chapter presents the main findings, and the discussion that follows situates these findings within the broader context of data collection and the existing body of literature.

5.2 Presentation of the Main Findings

The discussion in this chapter responds to the first research question which looks at how Algerian EFL learners perceive their experiences with blended learning. After analyzing the entire set of data on learners' perceptions, four subthemes emerged. The first explores learners' initial impressions and emotional responses to blended learning. The second emphasizes how blended learning technologies enhance the English language learning environment and shape learners' experiences. The third subtheme reveals learners' current experiences and future expectations in terms of the perceived benefits as well as challenges of blended learning. The last subtheme explores how blended learning is perceived by learners in terms of promoting or hindering their autonomy development.

5.2.1 Navigating Blended Learning: Learners' First Impressions and Emotional Responses to Blended Learning

The discussion in this section addresses the first sub-question which explores learners' perceptions of blended learning and blended technologies. Most of the participants

acknowledged that they were unprepared for the experience when they first started using blended learning for many reasons. However, their attitudes soon began to change to be positive as they embarked on the experience as shown in the following extract:

Kenza: at the beginning I felt a little bit frustrated and confused, at the same time I was feeling excited and motivated. This combination of feelings was because, first I didn't have an idea where to start from, I had no experience with e-learning platforms and technology. It was a new experience for me. On the other hand, I was excited and motivated because I was believing in my ability to manage that. [Narrative frame]

This extract demonstrates a transition and transformation in the students' attitudes toward blended learning. Initially, the students expressed concerns about managing learning in this new context due to some challenges such as technology use and lack of motivation. However, over time, they became interested and excited to engage in this experience. This indicates that students adapted to the blended learning model which is an autonomous supportive model. Learners adjusted their learning behaviors to fit the blended learning environment by finding ways to enhance their learning experience by themselves. They found ways to control technology and make use of it to promote their learning. This change in attitudes can be related to many factors which will be discussed below.

Moving to how students perceive the blended learning model, many of them had a positive perspective; they described it as effective, interesting, and helpful. This demonstrates that the students see value in this approach to learning. This finding concurs with many other studies investigating the effectiveness of blended learning in an EFL context such as Chan 2014; Yang 2014; Smyth et al. 2012; Sajid et al. 2016. This is evident in the following:

Djamal: I think that EFL blended learning model is effective, flexible, and helpful.

[Narrative frame]

There were many reasons why the students held such a positive perspective on EFL blended learning, amongst which was their enjoyment of using technology, including social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. This might justify the transformation and transition of attitudes students had when they started learning in a blended context. This aligns with recent research that claims that the use of technology in blended learning increases motivation, and interest and produces a positive mindset toward learning (Chan 2014, Nguyen 2015). Participants' perceptions can be revealed through the following extracts as being highly positive. They view technology as an exciting and effective tool to use and has the potential to improve their learning experiences. Besides participants expressed greater motivation and

enthusiasm to use it over previous teaching material .

Yanis: The use of technology is very exciting. I'm a person who likes to use a lot of technology and the Internet a lot, so this model fits my preferences. Personally, I see that the use of the board and a pen to explain lessons is outdated. Technology has advanced a lot so using it for learning is very fruitful. I found it interesting, exciting, and helpful [...] I got excited to use technology like social media YouTube WhatsApp Facebook for my learning. [Narrative frame]

Furthermore, the students' positive perceptions of the blended learning model revolve around the freedom and flexibility it provides for their language learning process. Features such as flexibility, convenience, and access were some of the positively cited advantages of blended learning and were most of the reasons why learners prefer this learning mode (Kaur 2013, Ju and Mei 2018, Graham and Stein 2014, Ivanova et al 2020):

Lyes: Even if it was hard to make a balance between all the modules, but I succeeded to learn in a new way which is more flexible than face to face learning [...] The part that I like most is the flexibility side. [Narrative frame]

Flexible learning significantly improves access for those who cannot attend fully face-to-face courses due to some personal circumstances such as work or distance from institutions (Flannery and McGarr, 2014). Therefore, blended learning is an appropriate educational alternative that aligns with the demands of modern life where many balance working and studying leading learners to accept flexible learning approaches such as blended learning. In this regard, learners indeed expressed their positive perceptions and satisfaction. This is evident in the following:

Tinhinane: The part that I like most is the convenience feature of blended learning. Like I could study from home at any time even if I am far from the university. This aspect has allowed me to be a student with other priorities in life. When I was going to the university every day, I hadn't so much time for other things. But with blended learning, I could study and work at the same time. This allowed me to organize my time and make a balance between work and studies and even life. [Narrative frame]

However, blended learning may not be suitable for everyone, particularly in circumstances where there is limited access to technology or issues with the internet. For example, contrary to what the majority of the learners expressed about blended learning, Kousseila, claimed:

I think that EFL blended learning model is not good for me because it was a hard experience [...] I didn't even have a phone yet at that time and of course no internet either to access to e-learning platform or following my lesson

This section highlighted students' positive perceptions of the blended learning model and its technologies. These perceptions are tied to the engagement, flexibility, technology use, and effectiveness of the blended learning environment. The following section will discuss the specifics of EFL language learning in this context.

5.2.2 The Role of Technology: Learning English as a Foreign Language in the Blended Context

The discussion in this section addresses the second sub-question of the first research question which looks at how Algerian EFL learners perceive the experience of learning English in a blended context. When stimulated by the sentence starters about how they see their language learning process, most of the students have described their experience as positive and fruitful.

Taous: The learning process in such an environment was good because it was a new experience that taught me different things like to work from home using technology, new type of tasks and assessments, different activities, and totally different learning environment. [Narrative frame]

Radia explained that she had the opportunity to learn differently, she acknowledged facing challenges but expressed a sense of accomplishment in successfully overcoming those challenges:

The learning process in such an environment is amazing because I had a chance to learn in two different environments and experience different things. I had some challenges like everyone, but I managed to get things done properly. [Narrative frame]

There is enough evidence in the literature that blended learning increases learners' motivation, and satisfaction, enhances learning opportunities, and offers effective learning experiences (Kaur 2013; Sajid et al 2016; Wong et al. 2020; Saliba et al 2013; Smyth et al 2012) and this was evident in the current study. We have seen in the previous section that students had some reservations about studying in a blended context at the early stages of its use due to some challenges which will be discussed in the coming section. In the later stages, however, they began to find ways to adapt to the change. As such, they expressed high motivation and satisfaction. Besides their attitudes and perceptions changed, thus ending up, considering their EFL blended learning experience positive, and successful, as is clear in the following extract:

Djamal: I liked my EFL learning experience which incorporated blended learning because it is advantageous. In addition, my EFL blended learning experience was quite successful as I passed all the modules, and I got good grades. [Narrative frame]

They also associated their skill improvement with their EFL blended learning experience which

again aligns with recent research (Ju and Mei 2018) as this extract shows:

Yasmine: I liked my EFL learning experience which incorporated blended learning because it helped me to improve many skills such as technology skills, critical thinking skills, searching skills, time management skills [...] For example, when I started learning in this environment, I watched a lot of tutorials about Microsoft Office, and other apps we were using like Zoom and Google Meets[...] before I wasn't good at these things. But with blended learning, I enhanced my technological skills. [Narrative frame]

The analysis highlighted also that blended learning has the potential to improve learners' academic achievements and scores. This is also in line with findings from previous research (Bazelaïs and Doleck 2018; Khader 2016; Wei et al. 2017; Bernard et al. 2014; Northey et al. 2015; Gonzalez-Gomez et al. 2016; Sajid et al. 2016, Daoud and Mahmoud 2013). This is clearly evident in the following comment by learners who associated their academic success, good grades, and learning outcomes with their EFL blended learning, affecting positively their motivation.

Anis: my EFL blended learning experience was so great because as I have mentioned above it facilitated my learning process. Even with my marks, I got good marks than I used to in the face-to-face learning environment. [Narrative frame]

Similar to other research findings, the analysis has revealed that blended learning impacts positively foreign languages learning and language skills such as vocabulary, writing, and reading (Ivanova et al. 2020; Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour 2017; Hassan et al. 2021; Abdul Rahman et al. 2020; Ehsanifard et al. 2020; Wong et al 2020; Banditvilai 2016). Some learners stated that they were able to enhance their vocabulary:

Aylan: and the learning process in such an environment is interesting and amusing at the same time. I learned a lot of things while I was trying to do research about my lessons. It enriched my vocabulary because whenever, I don't understand a word I look for it using online dictionaries. [Narrative frame]

Other students have mentioned an improvement in many other aspects of language learning in a blended learning context such as writing and grammar:

Radia: I liked my EFL learning experience which incorporated blended learning because it gave me the chance to learn the English language. So my experience was fruitful because technology is a main part of it. I gained knowledge about different things concerning language learning, like essay structure, grammar, doing research about a specific topic and presenting it, methodology [...] I was googling everything and whenever I needed to do so this helped me to learn many things. [Narrative frame]

The results in this section indicate that blended learning positively impacts EFL language learning by enriching the learning environment and enhancing EFL language proficiency. The next section will discuss the findings on learners' attitudes towards the implementation of the blended learning model.

5.2.3 Embracing Change: Current Experiences and Future Expectations

The analysis in this section presents findings on learners' perceptions regarding the implementation of blended learning in the context under study, addressing the third sub-question of the first research question, which explores challenges related to the specific context of Algeria and their implications for the future of blended learning. Throughout the narrative frames, all students shared their attitudes, perceptions, roles, strategies, challenges, and positive things from studying in a blended context. Most of the students enjoyed it, however, during the analysis I was also interested in revealing their evaluation of their current experiences and their hopes for future experiences. Some students expressed their excitement to adopt this mode of learning. This is shown in the following extract:

Djamal: I will be very happy if it will be used forever. I don't have any problems. I think I may need some time to build the habit of studying in this way but I was able to manage everything as it should during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are all using the internet and technology in our everyday life so why not use it for our learning?
[Narrative frame]

However, most of the student's perceptions of the implementation of blended learning are accompanied by their awareness of some constraints in their learning context, such awareness would help them understand themselves as learners and the environment around them. It also helps the researcher to explore their learning situation from the learners' perspectives and reveal the potential challenges that learners struggle with during their language learning process. It is deemed important then to listen to what students have to say to consider how these constraints might have affected their blended language learning experiences. While narrating their stories, learners were able to articulate some of the important challenges they faced in their blended language learning environment. The analysis of the narrative frames revealed that learners were aware of these constraints, and they used language such as "challenges" and "limitations" to describe them. One of the key constraints the learners mentioned was the lack of training and equipment. This is illustrated by the following:

Lyes: [...] but what I find bad is its use without induction and training. I don't find it

fair to put us in a program in which we don't have an idea. Personally, I had to spend a lot of effort just to get used to it. So, I would like to recommend the EFL blended learning to others but with an appropriate training. [Narrative frame]

Besides being implemented without training and induction, some students emphasized that the sudden shift to blended learning created significant challenges because not all students had access to essential technology and internet connectivity. Furthermore, learners' concerns extend to reach psychological readiness. This is shown in the following:

Wissam: I think that EFL blended learning model should be implemented carefully because it is not effective for everyone, especially for those who don't have access for example to technology devices and even Internet connectivity. For it to be successful model, it should be implemented carefully. I mean the change in the learning method at my university was so quick due to the pandemic, so I wasn't fully prepared for this change either psychologically or technically. Psychologically because I found myself in a completely new learning environment suddenly. Technically because I wasn't equipped with the necessary materials like computers, phones, and other technology devices. [Narrative frame]

This part has discussed learners' assessment of the implementation of the blended approach in the context under investigation by addressing the challenges that might affect its effectiveness. The analysis indicates that for blended learning to be effective, careful planning is essential. I will now proceed to analyze learners' perceptions of the blended learning impact on the fostering of their autonomy.

5.2.4 Fostered or Constrained? Autonomy in the Blended Learning Context

This section presents findings that address fourth sub-question of the first research question by exploring learners' perceptions of how blended learning influences the development of their autonomy. The analysis outlines learners' views on how blended learning fosters their ability to control their learning and engage in self-directed activities. The narrative frames contain sentence starters that stimulated the participants to describe their experiences and perceptions of learning English in a blended learning context in reference to autonomy. By doing this, it was easy for me as a data analyst to trace evidence of learners' autonomous behaviors and assess how they perceive their level of choice, control, independence, and even interdependence.

When analyzing the data, I was surprised to find out that learners had much to share about the changes blended learning brought to their language learning process in terms of autonomy. They indeed were aware of how blended learning affected their autonomous behaviors and the

aspects that they thought were changed. Learners also showed a good understanding of how learning English in blended learning is different from learning it in fully face-to-face learning. Generally speaking, they had positive perspectives and attitudes toward the impact of blended learning on their autonomy development and perceived blended learning to be an autonomous supportive environment. This concurs with other study findings that establish a relationship between the use of blended learning and the development of learner autonomy (Benson 2007; Zhang and Wu 2009; Lai and Gu 2011; Lewis 2013; Rienties et al. 2018; Shadiev and Yang 2020; Banditvilai 2016; Yoon 2016, Wang and Zhang 2022). Most of the students perceived themselves as taking on more responsibility for their learning as the following extract shows:

Radia: I noticed that blended learning made me feel more responsible for my learning because as I mentioned earlier it makes me an engaged language learner. I had more responsibilities in my learning, maybe the most important ones are planning for ways to organize my learning (like I make plans about when am I going to study x or y modules, for how long, things to focus on, assignments times...), I was also responsible to use materials that I can see useful to improve my understanding like google, YouTube videos, dictionaries. [Narrative frame]

Additionally, Hannane mentioned an example of an activity in which she was responsible for different things such as planning and defining content and procedures:

Hanane: I feel that I am more responsible during my learning process for example when doing project work activities, I had to choose the topic myself, make a plan for that, gather the necessary information using different resources, and prepare the final product of it (either PPT or essay). [Narrative frame]

Hanane further explained that planning for learning can include many aspects.

The difference between my previous learning experiences and blended learning in terms of autonomy is my ability to plan for my own learning in terms of time, resources, materials, and activities. [Narrative frame]

In addition, some students demonstrated an active role in planning for their learning and managing their time effectively despite the constraints of teachers' deadlines. This offers a balance between autonomy and external guidance as reflected in the following:

Idir: I developed a good habit of learning. As I was working and studying at the same time, I did good study plan with a good time management plan as well. I felt that it is my responsibility to organize my learning in the way that suits me. I was studying depending on my own plans with a consideration of deadlines created by teachers. [Narrative frame]

Interestingly, Souad shared her belief that being responsible for some aspects of learning such as when and where leads to autonomy development:

[...] all the actions I said earlier are done depending on me I mean when I wanted and where and what I wanted. So I think that is a good starting point to be an autonomous language learner. [Narrative frame]

Moreover, learners' responsibility over learning includes goal setting. Aylan talked about setting his own learning goals as evidenced by the following:

I organize my time in a way that will help me to achieve my goals. I focus on what I need the most. [Narrative frame]

As evident from the examples mentioned above, blended learning helps in shifting some responsibility over learning from teachers to students. However, some learners may find it challenging to take on this responsibility due to their over-reliance on teachers. For instance, Walid claimed:

EFL blended learning is not a good model because in the online phase of learning, the teacher is doing nothing and I was the one who was supposed to be the teacher for myself [...] the learning process in such an environment is very difficult because it made me feel as a learner challenged with a lot of things. [Narrative frame]

The analysis has also revealed that learners were engaged in some sort of self-evaluation, in which they identify their weaknesses, set objectives, and work to achieve them. Taous has made reference to this and stated:

I am aware of what I need to help myself understand better, I can see my strengths and weaknesses and I also set objectives to improve myself. Now, for example, I am engaged with one writing course because I really need it for the reduction of my thesis. So, I plan things depending on my needs. [Narrative frame]

Learners' perceptions were also concerned with the level of choice and control they had in the blended learning context. Control is another important feature of learner autonomy. Benson (2011) argued that the definition of autonomy should include the word "control" because it indicates that learners have the power to make choices and decisions. Consistent with findings from Mirriahi et al. (2015) and Tseng and Walsh (2016), findings from this study reveal that learners perceive blended learning as providing them with different opportunities to exercise control over several aspects of their English language learning. This, in turn, contributes to making their educational experience more self-directed and flexible. This is evident in the following:

Taous: *I felt more free or flexible in the way I organize my learning. I can learn*

whenever and wherever I want. I can focus on what I need more. I can use the resources that I see that they help me [...] I was to some extent independent in my learning process, and I was given choice sometimes to topics I want to study and the way in which I organize my studies. [Narrative frame]

Furthermore, students reported that they could control the pace of their learning. Blended learning enables them to progress through content at their own speed, focusing more on some areas over others depending on their needs and weaknesses. This is illustrated in the following:

Tinhinane: The difference between my previous learning experiences and blended learning in terms of autonomy is my ability to manage my learning from home effectively on my own. I did a lot of independent actions depending on what I need, I mean I focus more on what I need. I did extra research on the areas I needed the most and the areas in which I was good at no. [Narrative frame]

Ryma: I could study at any time from anywhere. I also could control the pace of learning this includes my study times, my focus, my use of technology, my learning techniques and styles...I can learn when I want and from where I want. I could focus more on what I needed and less on what I was good at. [Narrative frame]

Students also perceived blended learning as a model that encourages independent and outside classroom learning. This is evident in the following:

Aylan: [...] I realized also that learning can happen inside and outside the classroom. The use of technology helped a lot and made me an independent learner who can use different resources to improve his learning. [Narrative frame]

However, the notion of interdependence can also be traced in learners' stories concerning learning English in a blended learning context. In fact, students valued the importance of collaborating and helping each other when completing some language tasks in the blended context. For instance, they referred to many situations in which they cooperated with peers and teachers. That is to say that students made it clear that blended learning and more particularly blended technologies provide learners with many opportunities to work collaboratively and choose how to interact with peers and teachers. Students indeed acknowledged the role that their peers and teachers play in helping them promote their learning. Learners for example have created language learning communities using some of the blended technologies to discuss things that would promote their cooperative learning (see details in sections 6.2.1.2 and 6.3.1). This is in line with the widespread consensus in the literature that blended learning creates spaces for learners to engage in collaborative work with both teachers and peers (El-Ghalayini and El-Khalili 2012; Lalima and Dangwal 2017; Limniou et al. 2018; Miles and Foggett 2016; Nortvig et al., 2018). This is evident in the following:

Aylan: For example, while doing project work we were a group of 4 learners, we created a WhatsApp group and were discussing our task there. We divided parts of the work then each one of us did research about his parts. We were discussing many things. This really helped me in doing my task in a good way. [Narrative frame]

In this regard, I was amazed about the way Lynda has articulated her perceptions and made it clear that blended learning promotes independence and interdependence at the same time:

The part that I like most is the combination of guidance and autonomy this model offers. We as learners are given autonomy and independence once we are behind our screen. Still, we can be guided when attending face-to-face classes or meetings. [Narrative frame]

The combination of traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning in blended learning supports different levels of learner autonomy. Some learners, for instance, expressed the need for guidance from the teacher while still desiring to work independently. This is achievable in the blended context, as the blended approach allows learners to receive guidance from teachers during face-to-face sessions and then use online resources to deepen their understanding and achieve their learning goals.

Therefore, blended learning supports the reactive degree of autonomy (Littlewood 1999), in which learners are able to take charge of their learning once guidance has been provided for them. This is evident in the following:

Fahim: I feel so bored when I find myself in front of the whiteboard waiting for the teacher's explanation. I think that I can say I am autonomous all what I need is some guidance from the teachers especially concerning the content of the lesson. Once I know the topic and I can work independently to improve my understanding and achieve the objective. [Narrative frame]

The analysis in this section revealed that learners felt more responsible for their learning, and actively engaged in planning, goal setting, and self-evaluation. Their perceptions further suggest that blended learning offers learners more choices, control, and independence. Collaboration and interdependence were also a significant part of the blended experience. Overall, learners viewed blended learning as a learning environment that fosters autonomy.

5.3 Discussion of the Main Findings

The discussion in this chapter highlights Algerian EFL learners' perceptions with their blended learning experiences. This study is grounded in the premise that investigating learning-related issues from the learners' perspectives provides insightful data. In this respect, Lamb (2010)

argued that learners are important agents and remain a valuable source of knowledge about their learning thus, giving them a voice can have a significant contribution to exploring some education phenomena. Besides, I explained in the second chapter that investigating learners' views in different contexts helps researchers determine "factors of success and failure when innovative ideas and methodologies are introduced in the educational system" (Gout-Khenoune 2021). Following the same order used to present the findings in this chapter, I start the discussion with learners' perceptions of the blended learning model and blended technologies. Therefore, the discussion in this section will portray an interesting image not only of learning in the blended context as seen by learners but of learners themselves in terms of awareness, criticality, feelings, and attitudes.

5.3.1 Navigating Blended Learning: Learners' First Impressions and Emotional Responses to Blended Learning

Most of the learners had positive attitudes and showed increased enthusiasm regarding blended learning. This finding is in agreement with international research (Bath and Bourke 2010; Saliba et al 2013; Smyth et al. 2012; Sajid et al. 2016; Nortvig et al. 2018). Besides, Vaughan (2010); Fulkerth (2010); Lopez-Perez et al. (2011) revealed that a good implementation of blended learning can impact positively students' motivation and satisfaction. The present findings on student perceptions of the blended model are also in agreement with the local literature on the blended model (Ghounane 2020; Laifa et al. 2023), but only the part that describes learners' attitudes. This study, however, offers a deeper understanding of these positive perspectives from the learners' point of view than that usually depicted in EFL research in Algeria. It provides a clear picture of what aspects contributed to learners' satisfaction as will be presented throughout this section.

Ushioda notes that "people bring different degrees of motivation or readiness to embrace new technologies" (Ushioda, 2013, p. 1). This reflects the different EFL learners' attitudes in the study at hand. For instance, at the early stages of their blended experience, learners describe themselves as lacking motivation and readiness to learn in this way. However, students showed an awareness, and they related their feeling of unreadiness to some challenges being either internal or external to them. Despite the constraints, the students soon started to change their attitudes and find ways to adapt to the change and overcome the obstacles. Ushioda (2013) argued that technology is one of the motivational tools that can be used to engage learners and enhance the language learning process. This is what EFL learners did during their blended learning experiences. The analysis in this study has revealed that learners' change in attitudes

is related to their excitement to use technology for learning. Learners expressed an increased motivation to use some of the blended technologies such as Facebook, emails, WhatsApp, Zoom, and many other platforms. These findings also align well with those of Ghounane (2020) who reported that EFL Algerian learners were motivated to use social media such as Facebook for their learning.

Furthermore, I have cited in the literature review chapter cogent arguments in favour of blending learning by presenting its main advantages (see section 3.4) contributing to learners' satisfaction and enthusiasm. Learners' positive perceptions of blended learning in this study were also tied to some of these advantages including flexibility, freedom, convenience, and easy access. Learners could study from anywhere at any time and they could access learning regardless of some potential challenges that could affect their physical presence on campus. These aspects can have a direct impact on learners' motivation and engagement. In this regard, Ju and Mei (2018) argued that since learners can learn at ease, time, and pace, they are more interested in their learning process. Overall, learners expressed a positive perspective concerning blended learning. This approach to learning has the potential to increase learners' satisfaction, motivation, and engagement.

5.3.2 The role of Technology: Learning English as a Foreign Language in the Blended context

Students commented favorably about learning the English language in the blended context and their attitudes were predominately positive. Learners explicitly expressed their motivation and satisfaction towards language learning in this context because according to them blended learning has many advantages that have a direct positive impact on their language learning process. Some of these advantages include the chance to work from home using technology, exposure to various types of tasks and assessments, and different learning activities.

If we try to locate learners' perceptions of learning English in the blended context within the available literature, we can see that literature increasingly suggests that there is a potential relationship between the use of blended learning and the improvement in the language learning process (Kaur 2013; Sajid et al. 2016; Wong et al. 2020; Bath and Bourke 2010; Saliba et al. 2013; Smyth et al. 2012). In addition, studies on learning environments created by using technology (blended learning being one of them) revealed that such environments were pleasant to learners (Benson 2007; Zhang and Wu 2009; Lai and Gu 2011; Lewis 2013; Rienties et al. 2018; and Shadiev and Yang 2020). Learners' perceptions about language learning in a blended context revealed that the presence of technology in such a context provides them with

opportunities to develop both language and other general skills. Learners have talked about a noticeable improvement in skills such as technological skills, time management skills, research skills, and many other skills that are needed in this digital age and which are transferable across various fields and contexts. Besides, they mentioned significant improvement in language skills such as vocabulary, writing, and reading skills. In return, this seems to reflect learners' academic achievements because they reported that their academic journey was successful in terms of learning outcomes and grades. Therefore, there was a general consensus amongst learners that the different blended technologies helped them develop their English language learning process. This aligns with research findings on language skills and language learners (Adas and Bakir 2013; Grgurovic, 2011; Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour, 2017; Shih 2010). Maier et al. (2015) pointed out that social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter help learners create profiles through which they connect with others. Therefore, language learners are given opportunities to construct a language identity, build a relationship with the target culture, and join language communities that use SNS to enhance interaction and the exchange of knowledge between learners of different cultures and language levels (Maier et al 2015). The results in this study, therefore, indicate that such actions and practices were traced in learners' experiences. Learners mentioned using social networking to enhance their language learning. They indeed used it to discuss different learning-related issues which affected their knowledge and language skills. While there is a relationship between the use of technology and the enhancement of the language learning process, there seem to be other factors that also determine such a relationship such as learners' motivation and willingness to engage in such learning environments, awareness of the available opportunities, and so forth. These factors are discussed separately in Chapter 6.

Learners have also mentioned using some websites and digital resources provided on the internet to search for different language learning aspects. They were using Google for example to search for vocabulary, writing, grammar, and many other aspects, helping them to complete tasks effectively and to build rich linguistic knowledge. This again aligns with the available literature that recognizes websites and digital resources as important sources of linguistic and cultural knowledge for language learners (Shen et al. 2015). Generally speaking, learners appreciated their English language learning process in the blended context. Based on the findings, learners realize that the advantages of blended learning discussed in section 5.3.1 contributed to successful language learning. They also valued the role of technology in their

studies, seeing it as a means to access knowledge and develop as learners in different areas.

5.3.3 Embracing Change: Current Experiences and Future Expectations

Having discussed learners' attitudes toward the blended learning model, I now turn to discuss and interpret learners' perceptions of the future of blended learning in the context under investigation. The discussion of learners' future expectations here aims at finding out factors which might influence the future use and future implementation of blended learning. Indeed, the researcher hopes that the interpretation of learners' perceptions will uncover many issues that educators and policymakers need to consider for a successful implementation of modern technologies in education including blended learning.

The analysis in this section echoed learners' eagerness to adopt advanced learning technologies including blended learning despite the challenges that stand in their way. Most of the students expressed their willingness to study in a blended context in the future, this aligns with recent literature on blended learning in the Algerian context (Laifa et al. 2023). However, based on learners' reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of their blended experiences, they highlighted some issues that need to be addressed before implementing blended learning. Throughout the analysis, the most cited challenges are the technical and technological issues. This finding is in agreement with recent research on challenges that learners experience in blended environments internationally (Singh et al. 2021) as well as locally (Boutlidja 2021; Ghounane 2020; Barbar 2020, Guessabi 2021). Not all learners have access to computing devices and internet connection for the online component of blended learning. This was also confirmed in other studies such as Laifa et al. 2023; Ashraf et al. 2021 which reported that internet is not widely accessible in Algeria as some remote regions are not covered by internet services. These findings have important implications for different stakeholders in this specific context of Algeria because blended learning is not possible without proper technology. Another type of challenge learners pointed out was the skills issues. Not all learners have the needed skills and digital literacy to navigate the online portion of learning and get access to digital tools and platforms. Therefore, learners made it clear that the lack of training made the experience challenging. Training is indeed important and critical for a good implementation of blended learning. In this regard, Ashraf et al. (2021) argued that technology use in developing countries including the context under investigation is relatively new, thus, teachers, students, and staff lack ICT competencies and need appropriate training. What is worth mentioning is that although these challenges did not affect learners' willingness to learn in such an environment and indeed, they were keen to keep up with this global learning tendency, they can limit the

potential benefit of blended learning in the context being studied.

I have mentioned in the literature review chapter (3.6) that blended learning in the Algerian context is still in its infancy because its first use was only during the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, it is not surprising that its first implementation is accompanied by some challenges being either personal or contextual. However, since the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is assessing blended learning as a possible permanent plan for Algerian higher education (Laifa et al. 2023), addressing such challenges can contribute positively to understanding the characteristics of the learning environment which in return can help stakeholders make informed decisions. Probably, one of the strengths of this study is the understanding it provides of the characteristics of the blended environment in the context under study from the learners' perspectives. The learners' reflections provided a genuine representation of the contextual factors that inhibited their language learning. Generally speaking, learners acknowledged that blended learning provides a supportive and encouraging learning environment and offers flexibility, convenience, and choice. However, their experience was also characterized by some challenges that were discussed previously. What is important here is that knowledge of such constraints has significant implications for teachers, course developers, educators, and even learners. Indeed, for any efforts to create learning contexts that embrace global learning tendencies such as blended learning to prove effective, learners' reflections, perceptions, and observations in this matter need to be taken seriously. For example, educators, policymakers and education institutions need to address the issue of the internet and its quality because it is a significant barrier to the effective implementation of blended learning as well as to consider providing technical and technological support for learners. Therefore, a good understanding of such constraints offers valuable insights into what an effective blended experience constitutes from purely learners' perspectives.

Finally, one of the most apparent and important findings of this research concerns the learners being studied. Learners are well aware of the characteristics of their learning environment; what elements contribute to successful language learning experiences as well the areas that need consideration and improvement. The way learners articulated the list of factors they see as challenges in their blended experience makes it clear that learners' awareness can be said to describe learners in the context under investigation.

5.3.4 Fostered or Constrained? Autonomy in the Blended Learning Context

In this section, I discuss how learners perceive the impact of blended learning on the fostering of autonomy. The analysis of this issue has provided important findings on how students

perceive the impact of blended learning in terms of fostering their autonomy development. Most of the students perceived blended learning to have the potential to empower them as responsible, engaged, self-directed, and autonomous language learners. They illustrated different learning situations and tasks in which they were given the chance to control their learning process and subsequently practice and promote their autonomous behaviors. After analyzing learners' reflections, it was evident that certain aspects were shared amongst the participants and could be linked to learner autonomy. Learners' perceptions of their language learning process in the blended environment indicate that learners were responsible for different learning aspects such as planning, setting their own learning goals, and selecting methods and techniques.

Responsibility in learning is a notion which is recurrent in the literature on learner autonomy, with a general agreement among scholars that assuming responsibility in learning is one of the prerequisites of learner autonomy. Holec (1981) emphasized that autonomous learning requires learners "to have and hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of his learning" (p3). Responsibility for learning can include different aspects such as planning for learning, defining content and progression, determining objectives, selecting methods and techniques, and evaluating what has been learned (Holec 1981). Learners' perceptions provide rich insights into the different aspects over which they held the responsibility in the blended context. This includes planning and organizing their learning, determining their focus, selecting techniques and methods, setting their goals, and self-evaluating their work. Furthermore, the way learners discussed the issue of responsibility in blended learning indicates their awareness and demonstrates their mature thinking regarding their responsibility and roles as learners of English in a blended context and the implications of language learning in such a context. This was clearly evident in the level of arguments explanations, and illustrations which learners provided in support of their reflections.

In addition to an increased sense of responsibility, learners perceived blended learning to provide them a room to exercise some control over their learning. In the context of EFL learning and learner autonomy, the concept of control could be discussed in light of the framework of control over learning put forward by Benson (2011). This framework proposes three different interconnected levels of control that learners can exercise over their language learning process namely, control over learning management, learning content, and cognitive processing. Control over learning management includes planning and organizing the learning process such as determining where, when, and how learning takes place. Control over learning content, an

aspect of learning management, focuses on the what and why of language learning. These are mainly concerned with a set of observable behaviors and the cognitive capacities underlying these behaviors. However, the last type of control is over cognitive processing. This dimension is entirely cognitive as it involves directly managing the cognitive processes through which learners manage their learning and its content. Therefore, it can be understood that this dimension is essential to effectively control and manage the two other dimensions namely learning management and content. Accordingly, the dimensions put forward by Benson (2011) are interdependent.

To discuss this study's findings in relation to Benson's model, it can be noticed through the learners' reflections and perceptions of the impact of blended learning on the fostering of autonomy that learners seem to have more control over cognitive processes (I have discussed this under the use of language learning strategies in section 6.3.1) and the learning management. However, they were found to have less control over the content of their language learning. For instance, the analysis showed that learners in the blended environment did not take part in planning their English language course content. They were offered some chances to choose the content when it comes to some activities such as project work, presentations, and investigations. Besides, they had some input on the "what" because students reported exercising some control over the pace of their learning and they could choose what aspects to focus on more. As for learning management, learners had direct control over these aspects and they made it clear that they controlled effectively the when, where, and how of learning. Furthermore, this seems to be applicable in a full sense for out-of-class learning because learners reported controlling all aspects of learning discussed in Benson's (2011) model. In the analysis, I reported different examples of learners who managed to learn different language learning-related aspects independently using different resources (I will discuss this under learners' awareness and independent interaction with the available resources in section 6.2.1.1). Besides, what is important to note here, is that given such a chance does not necessarily mean that learners will exercise such control over learning, but this also depends on other factors such as learners' capacities, motivation, and willingness. The findings indeed revealed that learners during the blended experience showed a willingness to take control of their learning and have the capacity for monitoring, planning, and evaluating their learning.

Interestingly, one of the major contributions of this study is in redefining the Algerian language learners' profile. Although the results of this study can be aligned with those revealed in the EFL research context concerning the potential of blended learning to enhance autonomy, they

indicate a mismatch with previous studies in the EFL context of Algeria. Thus, the findings in this study offer unique perspectives in describing learners' readiness for autonomous learning. The way learners' readiness for autonomous learning has been depicted in this context should be carefully and critically approached as this study offered fresh insights that should also be considered. For example, the Algerian EFL literature usually describes learners as lacking readiness and willingness to take responsibility for their learning and to be engaged in autonomous learning (Hadi 2012; Hadi 2018; Ghout-Khenoune 2014; Bensalem 2018). However, the data I gathered and the analysis I performed in the present study have demonstrated that learners are ready to take on responsibility and control their own learning when the context allows them to do so. The findings reported in the present study confirmed those reported in other studies concerning the influence a learning environment has on learners' predisposition for autonomous learning (Ghout-Khenoune 2018; 2021; Palfreyman 2014). In this regard, Lamb and Reinders (2007) asserted that "students' constructs about learning are always associated with a context" (191). Ghout-Khenoune (2018; 2021) investigated learners' readiness to learn autonomously in Algeria and findings reported that learners possessed an interesting potential to learn autonomously in Ghout-Khenoune's term "the seeds of autonomy were there", however, the demonstration of this potential is conditioned by the learning environment. The author asserted that the educational culture in Algeria including testing culture and teachers' roles does not support the development of autonomy and therefore autonomy "needed fertile soil to grow and flourish. Evidently, this is dependent on the creation of an ecologically valid context in which space is provided for the development of an autonomous supportive environment" (p. 10). So, it can be noticed that the environment plays a key role in determining the kind of control learners can exercise, and blended learning seems to be an autonomous supportive environment because it provides learners a unique and unprecedented chance to show their predisposition and readiness for autonomous learning. Learners in the present study made it clear that blended learning determines what, when, and how learners can control their own learning. Littlewood (1999) argued that the learning environment can either facilitate or hinder autonomy and language learning, therefore, blended learning seems to be facilitative.

Learners' account of learning English in the blended context also sheds light on the social dimension of learning. Although learners sit most of the time in front of their screens and work independently outside the framework of the classroom context, the essence of interdependence was traced. Research on learner autonomy and EFL learning emphasized the importance of

cooperation and collaboration in learning a language. Vygotsky's theory valued the role of the sociocultural context for learning. Accordingly, learners learn and construct knowledge from each other through communication, discussion, and collaboration. Besides, early on, Little (1991) considered learner autonomy as a result of interdependence rather than independence. Recently, Teng (2019) argues that learner autonomy should be viewed not only as learners' capacity but also as the result of interaction with others in their context. In this regard, there is evidence that the blended context provides learners with support, help, and assistance. Learners' stories can provide an authentic and valid account of the elements in the blended context which provides affordances for learners to learn collaboratively with teachers and peers by using different blended technologies including emails, discussion forums, online meetings, and social media. Learners use these technologies to create language learning communities and groups in which they assist each other (See details in section 6.3.1). These findings are consistent with other study findings (Akbarov et al. 2018; Ghazizadeh and Fatemipour 2017; Grgurovic 2011; Liu 2013; Shih 2010; Zhang and Zhu 2018). Riel et al. (2016) for example, argued that learners are offered online or face-to-face places where they can meet and work on meaningful projects collaboratively in the blended learning environment, contributing to successful language learning. Therefore, one of the main findings of this research is that blended learning enhances the language learning environment which in return affect positively many aspects of English learning and learner autonomy such as promoting collaborative learning, providing opportunities to practice the language beyond the class settings, and encouraging independent learning.

Finally, learners' perceptions of the impact of blended learning on the development of learner autonomy reveal their readiness and aptitude to learn English autonomously when they are given room to show and practice their autonomous behaviors and that the educational situation can either support or hinder this readiness for autonomous learning and thinking. These perceptions provide valuable insights for initiatives seeking to cultivate autonomous principles in the Algerian context. These perceptions provide a springboard for further research in the Algerian EFL context on this important but neglected aspect.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has presented and discussed Algerian EFL learners' views and perceptions on different aspects of blended learning. Learners predominantly hold a positive perspective on learning English in a blended context. They expressed their greater satisfaction

and motivation concerning the flexibility, convenience, and access that blended learning offers, which has in return impacted their language learning positively.

Although learners expressed their motivation and showed interest in studying in a blended context, they acknowledged some constraints such as technical issues and digital literacy. The findings, therefore, underscored the importance of considering such challenges to ensure a successful implementation of blended learning in the EFL context of Algeria.

Overall, learners view blended learning as an environment that supports autonomy, offering them opportunities to take responsibility for their learning and exercise control over some aspects of their language learning process. Blended learning offers also chances for collaboration and cooperation which are essential ingredients of learner autonomy. This highlights the potential of blended learning in enhancing the learning environment and encouraging learner autonomy.

Chapter Six: Manifestations of Autonomy

6.1 Introduction

The exploration of the impact of blended learning on language learners' autonomy is at the core of the present investigation. This chapter presents the participants' practices while learning English as a foreign language in a blended context, their interaction with the elements that are available in their learning environment, and how students make use of language learning strategies to manage their learning. It presents whether and how EFL learners learn autonomously in the blended context. This chapter also presents the range of opportunities blended learning provides to learn English independently with a particular focus on how learners interact with these opportunities. Besides, it discusses the roles that both teachers and learners played in this context from students' perspectives. Finally, learners' internal factors such as motivation and willingness will be explored as these determine how effectively learners engage with all the affordances brought by blended learning. The analysis and discussion in this chapter allow us to understand the nature of the relationship between blended learning and learner autonomy development.

6.2 Presentation of the Main Findings

In this chapter, the analysis aims to respond to the second question of the research which investigates the different ways blended learning impacts learner autonomy development. Learner autonomy within the blended context can be observed through different manifestations in learners' experiences. These manifestations are explored in four subthemes. These include increased awareness, independent interactions with the learning environment, and strategic actions, especially the use of language learning strategies. Autonomy is also reflected in the way blended learning redefines learners' roles, fostering a greater sense of responsibility as well as in the evolving roles of teachers. Finally, autonomy is also evident in the level of learners' motivation and willingness, which significantly influence their engagement in the blended learning experience and their ability to learn autonomously.

6.2.1 Tracing Autonomy in Learners' Actions

Throughout the narrative frames, the students have reported different ways of adapting and responding to their learning environment. They have mentioned myriad actions and practices they did either inside or outside the classroom, with or without the help of the teacher. These

actions and practices have the potential to define the degree of autonomy learners possess. This theme is indeed important as it discusses how autonomy manifests in learners' actions within the blended context. The discussion on learner autonomy manifestation in learners' actions is further divided into two themes.

6.2.1.1 Awareness and Independent Interaction with their Learning Environment

The analysis has revealed that learners take different independent initiatives as a way to engage with their learning environment. These initiatives result from their willingness to improve their understanding and their language learning experience. Students for instance proactively and reactively seek information using different resources which range from books and online materials to peers and teachers. This suggests that learners are aware of and understand the resources available in their blended learning context being either material or social and make effective use of them to promote their learning. Such interaction and awareness can make it possible to find out the degree to which learners exercise their autonomy in relation to context as Palfreyman (2014) argued, autonomous learners are aware of and understand the resources available to them.

Students have reported using technology as a tool that is available in their learning environment to access information and resources for language learning, as such Taous considered technology particularly the internet as a useful tool that improves her learning experience and stated

Technology has always helped us to figure out some issues, misunderstandings, and even our development as learners or individuals. Like we are researching every single thing in our lives. [...] Personally, I am using technology and internet a lot in my studies, I resort to Google and other websites whenever I feel that there is a need to do so. [Narrative frame]

Additionally, blended learning technologies and online tools foster supportive language learning environments, where learners can collaborate to overcome challenges and enhance understanding. The analysis revealed that some students work collaboratively with peers through online platforms and use some blended technologies to access both material and social resources. This aligns well with Palfreyman's (2014) concept of a well-situated learner who does not work in isolation but actively engages and interacts with the learning environment in meaningful ways. Learners in this study, discuss and share knowledge with peers as well as seek support, demonstrating their purposeful engagement and interaction with their context. The following extracts provide evidence for this:

Kamelia: I felt lost many times and to help myself I usually discuss with my friends to check some important things with them. we have created a WhatsApp group in which we discuss all the things related to our learning. [Narrative frame]

Dalila: when we have activity like group work, we create video meetings on Zoom (just us as friends) to discuss the work. [Narrative frame]

Furthermore, these blended learning technologies and online learning tools extend learning beyond the formal classroom setting. Farid, for instance, shared his experience of using online resources to support his English language learning, demonstrating how social media can be useful learning tools. By seeking out content related to language learning on social media, this student demonstrates a purposeful interaction with the affordances that are available in his learning environment as well as an autonomous learning behavior. This is illustrated in the following:

I used online articles, YouTube videos, google, and learning forums, I also subscribed to different social media platforms to some channels that speak about a topic of my interests. For example, I followed one guy on Instagram and TikTok who speaks about British civilization. I really found it as interesting content because I had a module called Civilization which focuses on the British civ. [Narrative frame]

Similarly, Yanis has shown awareness of the available resources and explained how he uses some online platforms and online quizzes to improve his grammar:

[...] I used to watch a lot of videos about grammar. I liked the way they explain some grammar aspects in a video of 3 mins and which I find very clear. I also did a lot of grammar quizzes online on Google. [Narrative frame]

Others have reported using some language software during their blended learning experience which has improved their language skills. This is reflected in the following:

Lamia: I liked the fact that I was typing my assignment in a word format because this made my writing improved by the use of some apps like Grammarly. When I finish my assignment, I open Grammarly, and I check my spelling, punctuation, grammar, and conciseness. [Narrative frame]

Finally, some students have also stated that they used additional materials to complement those prepared by the teacher, and learners' interaction with these resources can be said to be informed and non-determined. Learners make informed decisions about what resource to use and why. Then they make effective use of them to improve and facilitate their English language learning. These findings are in agreement with what Palfreyman (2014) explained of an autonomous learner's actions which are said to "broadly follow an agenda internal to the learner

and will be non-determined: not oblivious to the context but tending towards proactive rather than reactive autonomy(p. 4). This is evident in the following extract:

Yacine: I used to look for the information myself, and even when our teachers post lectures online, I usually make use of other resources rather than the ones the teacher has chosen for us in order to make my understanding better [...] this has also helped me in integrating technology in my studies appropriately, I mean I select resources, materials depending on my needs. therefore, this has improved my searching skills as well as technological skills. [Narrative frame]

Yasmine stated that she identifies resources in her environment that are relevant to her needs and purposes:

I can focus on what I need more. I can use the resources that I see that they help me.... I mean I select resources, materials depending on my needs. [Narrative frame]

To conclude, it is obvious that blended learning provides learners with a variety of resources, however, the analysis was useful in the sense that it made it evident that learners realize the existence of these resources in their blended learning context and make beneficial use of them. This suggests that learners are aware of the elements surrounding their context that have the potential to help them achieve their learning. These findings can be aligned with Palfreyman's (2006) view that learners are always seen in contexts in which they interact and learn; awareness in terms of what is available to them would determine their autonomy. In this regard, he argued that "individual can be seen as actively taking up a particular stance with respect to material and social resources, and learner autonomy as developing awareness of these resources and of one's own use of them" (Palfreyman 2006, p. 354). Having presented students' awareness and independent interaction with their blended learning environment, I will now turn to discuss which strategies they used to operate within this environment.

6.2.1.2 Strategic Actions and Interactions: The Use of Language Learning Strategies

Although language learning strategy use was not explicitly investigated, it emerged as a recurring theme throughout the narrative frames. When narrating their experience in learning English in a blended context, students have referred to all the strategies they used to achieve their learning. I realized that it would be useful to discuss it in a separate section. An autonomous language learner makes effective use of learning strategies (Wenden 1991; Oxford 2003; 2016). These strategies are conscious actions used by the learners to promote and control their language learning (Oxford et al. 2014). I have explained in the literature review that learning strategies are considered an important component of self-regulation, as they enable learners to actively manage their own learning. The analysis has therefore explored strategic

choices learners make and provided evidence that learners are actively employing the strategies that best work for them and help them manage and self-regulate their learning as well as take control over it. There have been cogent arguments in the literature that there is a direct relationship between strategy use and autonomy. Autonomous language learners can select, choose, and use language learning strategies effectively and appropriately (Chamot 2005; 2009; Cohen 2011; Griffiths 2013; Little 2000b; Littlewood 1996; Oxford 2003; 2016; Wenden 1991). Accordingly, the analysis has revealed that learners are actively engaging with their learning environment by using a myriad of language learning strategies. This includes the use of cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective ones.

The analysis revealed clear examples of cognitive strategy use such as notetaking and resourcing. Such strategies engage learners in some mental processes directly related to processing the language information. Notetaking helps learners organize and internalize the lesson context while resourcing allows them to look for additional information to improve their understanding. The following extract illustrates this point:

Djamel: I had to watch and rewatch the lesson. write down the most important elements of the lecture and rephrase them so as to be able to write a summary of the lesson. I used some Internet resources just to be able to find the exact words to rephrase what the teacher said in the video. [Narrative frame]

Other students have also demonstrated the use of higher-order thinking strategies, referred to as “metacognitive strategies”. These types of strategies help learners go beyond managing information to control the learning process. Examples of these strategies include planning, monitoring, evaluating, self-management, and self-reinforcement, all of which regulate their learning process. This is evidenced in the following:

Lyes: I realize that the most important things I did and was responsible for were, making a good plan for my studies, selecting the most appropriate techniques that help me understand the materials, use all the resources to help myself understand some things, and sometimes I even evaluate myself and my work by for example drawing faces near the work I have completed. :) means I did well, and sad face means I wasn't that good. [Narrative frame]

The above extract demonstrates how Lyes is actively engaged in planning and monitoring his progress throughout the learning process, indicating his awareness of his learning goals and the adjustment needed to achieve them. These behaviors are evidence of learners’ self-regulation and effective use of strategies to improve their performance, leading to more effective learning outcomes (Dörnyei 2005).

The use of social and material resources was also evident in the student's reflection, for instance, Anis wrote:

We created a group on WhatsApp, and we shared a lot of materials there like videos, like grammar exercises. We used to discuss a lot of things about our learning in that group and we use even to help each other in tasks and activities. [Narrative frame]

The above extract presents evidence of the use of material resources (social media) to facilitate access to social resources (friends). This again highlights learners' awareness of the appropriate strategies to achieve their learning goals. Without the learner's awareness of the affordances brought by technology, friends would not be a resource for Anis. He chooses to build a language-learning community with his friends through WhatsApp to share experiences, seek advice, and discuss things.

Some other students reported using some personalized strategies to overcome difficulties when completing language tasks. As such Farouk shared how he adapts his approach to make challenging tasks manageable:

Sometimes I summarise the lesson in the form of points, graphics, sometimes I draw situations just to make things easy for me.

Besides identifying the type of strategies learners employed, the analysis I performed on the data revealed the students' strategic knowledge which includes knowledge of strategy type, use, choice, and evaluation (Wenden 1998). When describing their actions in different language learning situations and tasks, learners justified their strategy choice and use, and they linked it to their needs. This is reported in the literature as one characteristic of autonomous learners, for example, Sinclair (1999) argued that successful and autonomous learners have greater awareness in terms of selecting and using specific language learning strategies. Some students shared their experience with using some graphics to facilitate their learning. I think the following extract is a good example of strategy knowledge and evaluation. This student has decided on the strategy to use depending on his learning needs and preferences. So, his choices are tailored. This is illustrated in the following:

Rayane: I developed strategies that suit me well and suit my learning styles. For example, when I read the teacher's pdfs, I used to summarise the important points in the form of a circle, pyramid, or graphic these helped me to retain them well. For free topic essays, for example, I select a topic I am interested in, I brainstorm my ideas in the form of shapes, and I link between ideas with arrows, ...until I produce a coherent piece of writing. I developed these methods when I was studying from home. [Narrative frame]

As we can notice from the above learners' awareness of themselves, and their learning vividly manifests itself in the student articulations and use of language and concepts like strategies, techniques, and methods. Furthermore, the above extracts demonstrated that learners' actions are strategic and informed. They interact with their learning environment purposefully and strategically using cognitive, metacognitive, and social learning strategies and many others to achieve their learning. Students were also aware of the affordances brought by technology, more particularly social media in the learning process, and interacted with them effectively. This is evident in what Rayane has further explained:

I can't also deny that technology helped me a lot during my learning because I look always for information from the net. Social media were also of great help because I subscribed to different YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok channels that give interesting content about different subjects and topics. [Narrative frame]

I have argued in the literature review chapter that while the availability of affordance in the learning environment provides opportunities to enhance language learning and autonomy, it is ultimately, the learner's engagement with these affordances that determine their effectiveness. Souad for instance, demonstrated greater awareness when interacting with these affordances and stated:

When there is a need I make some extra efforts to make things easier and more understandable like searching on the net and selecting the relevant sources to check because some online materials are maybe not adequate to my level. So I choose what is appropriate for me. [Narrative frame]

To conclude, learners' actions are informed and strategic. They are not only aware of themselves but also of their learning. This awareness is the basis for the application of language learning strategies (Palfreyman 2014; Sharmin 2024), and self-regulation of learning. This means that learners choose strategies depending on their needs, styles, preferences, and the learning situation and task.

6.2.2 Redefining Learners' Roles: Evolving Perceptions of Responsibility in Blended Learning Context

In this section, the analysis presents how learners perceive and view their responsibilities and roles in learning the English language in a blended context. When analyzing the data, my focus was specifically on exploring how the implementation of blended learning might have affected learners' perceptions of their roles. Interestingly, I noted that students were aware of the change and its requirements and were finding ways to adapt to the change resulting in a change in their roles and practices. Besides, the analysis provided insights into the multifaceted roles students

take on in a blended learning environment. The majority of students described themselves as being actively engaged in their EFL blended experience compared to their face-to-face learning environment, showing a strong sense of their roles. This is evident in the following extract:

Djamal: I consider my blended learning experience successful because most of the work was done by myself, I did a lot of research about my modules about methodology about the way I write essays I just developed my knowledge on my own. [Narrative frame]

Hanane: [...] it made me feel that I have to do a lot of things, which I did not used to do before. In the face-to-face lessons, I used to stay on my chair, listen to my teachers' lectures, and ask questions if I had any. However, in the blended learning I have to do everything on my own. So I feel a teacher for myself. [Narrative frame]

In addition, students showed awareness about the roles they are expected to perform in the context of blended learning. This is clearly evident from the following:

Kenza: [...] it could be good if it is used properly by students who are willing to take the challenge and count on themselves to work hard because as far as I can interpret, blended learning is about me being the manager of my learning. [Narrative frame]

Furthermore, students reported feeling more engaged in the EFL blended learning context. Many studies highlighted that among the most cited benefits of blended learning is its potential to boost learners' engagement and active participation in their foreign language learning process. Kenny and Newcombe (2011) argued that one of the "major reasons for faculty adoption of the blended technique is to increase student engagement and involvement in the learning process and improve student learning" (p. 47). Similarly, research has consistently linked blended learning to enhancing EFL learners' engagement (Banditvilai 2016; Liu 2013; Wei et al. 2017). The analysis in this study revealed that learners perceived blended learning as more engaging compared to traditional classroom settings, with many expressing a stronger sense of involvement in the learning process. This is clear in the following extract:

Radia: EFL blended learning is more engaging, and student centred probably because it focuses more on us as students, my role as a language learner is important because I am no longer going to the classroom and take a sit and listen to teachers' explanation. However, I developed my understanding alone by my own exploration of topics. So, it makes me engaged as a learner. [Narrative frame]

Interestingly, students also showed awareness of the ability of blended learning to change their profiles as language learners, as highlighted in the following comments:

Kamelia: I felt myself active and engaged without paying attention to my profile

change. **[Narrative frame]**

Sarah: *I felt myself engaged, active and independent. I work on my own [...] because I am no longer a passive learner but an active, independent learner. **[Narrative frame]***

Toufik: *I become a responsible and active language learner who plays different roles. Not just sitting and listening to teachers' explanations. **[Narrative frame]***

The above extracts demonstrate that learners perceive themselves to have greater roles in the language learning process. They are no longer listeners and consumers of teachers' knowledge, but they are active agents who take independent initiatives to enhance their learning.

After presenting how learners perceived their own roles and responsibilities in the blended context, the following part presents how learners perceived their teachers' roles and responsibilities in the same context.

6.2.3 Teachers as Guides: Learners' Perceptions on Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities

In the previous section, students perceived themselves to have greater roles in their language learning. As for their perceptions of the roles their teachers play, learners reported that while teachers are not the only source of knowledge, they still play significant roles in the blended learning context. Students acknowledged that teachers contribute meaningfully to the success of their blended language learning experience and they noted that the roles of teachers in this context differ from those in traditional fully face-to-face learning environment. The analysis revealed that in the blended learning context, students perceived their language teachers as resource persons, helping and guiding them throughout their learning process. Furthermore, when analyzing the data, I noticed that whenever learners spoke about their teachers' roles, they also, in comparison, referred to their roles. Unlike in face-to-face learning, students perceived teachers in blended learning to have less control and influence over learning than the students. This is illustrated in the following:

Lyes: *[...] this is the first time I have experienced learning in this way, I used to get everything from my teacher, I was passive learner. However, with the use of blended learning, I was more active. **[Narrative frame]***

Yasmine also made it evident that teachers' roles were minimized:

*I felt more flexible because I was looking for information myself, I was not waiting for my teachers to provide me with that. **[Narrative frame]***

Although students acknowledge the essential roles teachers play in blended learning such as providing feedback, they perceived the constant presence of teachers in traditional face-to-face

classrooms could limit the roles they play in learning. This is evident in the following:

Lynda: Sometimes I feel that the teacher's presence in the classroom all the time makes me dependent learner because when I see teachers I considered them as the only source of knowledge. [...] however sometimes I need teachers especially like for feedback interaction, discussion. so, this is why I prefer blended learning because I can study online and go face to face to discuss things with teachers and classmates.
[Narrative frame]

In addition, Farid perceived teachers' roles as a guide, and he mentioned using some blended technologies such as emails to seek guidance:

So, most of the work is done by me I only resort to teachers when I need guidance. When I have some difficulties, I send an email to the teacher to ask for guidance.
[Narrative frame]

Overall, learners described teachers' roles as being different in the blended context. They are described as having minimized roles and being of a supervisory and guiding nature. Students associated these teachers' roles with them being more independent, flexible, and autonomous in their language learning process. They explained that when the teachers have less control over the learning process, they gradually work towards more independence and autonomy and become more engaged in the decision-making process, as such Souad reported:

[...] I felt this because in a face-to-face classroom our teachers were spoon-feeding us they give us everything. Then we got used to that. But now I had to be active and thought about ways to facilitate the learning process on my own. **[Narrative frame]**

To recap, the analysis has shown that students perceive the teacher to have essential roles in the blended learning context, however, they equally perceive their roles to be different from their previous learning experiences namely fully face-to-face learning. After presenting learners' perceptions of their teachers' roles in the blended learning context, I will present in the following section the analysis of the affective factors influencing learners in such a context.

6.2.4 The Affective Driving Force toward Autonomy: Motivation and Willingness

I have provided evidence in the previous section that blended learning offers various and interesting chances for learners to contribute actively to their learning. In this section, I will explore how were the learners emotionally engaged with their learning and what were their emotional reactions when they were facing language learning tasks, context, teachers and peers, and materials. It is indeed important to explore what degrees for example of motivation, willingness, and readiness the learners brought when they embraced the blended learning

experience.

Learners' narratives revealed a strong willingness driven by motivation to engage in the blended learning experience. Learners demonstrated readiness, high levels of motivation, and determination to adapt to the new learning context despite the difficulties encountered. The following extract supports this:

Djamal: I had no experience of using technology for my learning purposes. However, I challenge myself to adapt to the new situation and encourage myself to be ready for this new experience. [Narrative frame]

Yasmine: It was the first time for us to use it in our studies. However, I was ready for that challenge even if I know that I will encounter a lot of obstacles during my learning process. I was very motivated to embark on a new learning experience. [Narrative frame]

Yacine has admitted that blending online and face-to-face learning sessions creates a sense of motivation, this is evident in the following:

[...] EFL blended learning is efficient in learning a foreign language like English because when there is a variation there is motivation and excitement for learning. [Narrative frame]

The above extracts again suggest that students have an awareness and active knowledge about their new learning environment including its constraints, requirements, and characteristics. Moreover, learners were also aware of themselves in terms of their capacities, strengths, preferences, and styles. Such awareness contributes to their self-efficacy and drives them towards more success in their language learning, Kenza has for example explained:

It was a new experience for me. However, I was excited and motivated because I was believing in my ability to manage that. [Narrative frame]

Technology use, being a pivotal component of the blended learning model, was a source of motivation for many students. Students expressed motivation to use online platforms to enhance their language learning. They indeed reported that working collaboratively with peers using these online platforms creates a comfortable language-learning environment for them. This is shown in the following extract:

Yanis: I really enjoyed using YouTube and Google, to do research about the different things we were studying. [Narrative frame]

Kamelia: [...] for group work, we create video meetings on Zoom (just us as friends) to discuss the work but we laugh at the same time (we have fun) actually this made me

feel more unstressed and relaxed. [Narrative frame]

This suggests that learners experienced positive emotions in their blended experience resulting in them being more likely motivated to contribute actively to their learning.

The few examples discussed above made it evident that learners display a high level of motivation. Accordingly, learners' actions and practices were driven by willingness and excitement. Such feelings can drive learners towards more autonomy in their learning.

6.3 Discussion of the Main Findings

Autonomy development was explored through learners' reflections about their practices in learning English in the blended context. This exploration was based on Palfreyman's (2014) perspective, which views autonomous learners not as entirely independent or isolated from their context but rather interacting continuously and engaging actively with their learning environment to exercise autonomy. In addition, the exploration of learner autonomy in this study was shaped by the results of the analysis performed on the data, which reveal the versions, and degrees of autonomy present in learners' behaviors in the context under investigation.

Before discussing the findings, it is both useful and practical to identify and critically reflect on the dimensions, versions, and degrees of autonomy I am seeking in learners' practices and perceptions. I will draw on Benson's (2011) definition of learner autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 58). However, as Reinders (2011) emphasizes, having the capacity alone is not enough because learners exercise autonomy within the situational and social context. Accordingly, it is important to note that there would be no usefulness in possessing the capacity to control learning but not being able to exercise it, so this capacity must be accompanied by an action (Reinders 2011; 2022) being either cognitive or observable. Besides the learning context has to encourage and allow space for the development of such capacities. Learners' actions are performed in a context, therefore, to do justice to the term, it is useful to consider autonomy from an ecological perspective to explore how learners interact with their learning context to exercise their capacity for autonomous learning. The definition suggested by Palfreyman (2014) will guide the evaluation and exploration of Algerian learners' autonomy development. Besides, literature on language learning autonomy recognized autonomy as meta capacity and a complex construct and a construct of constructs including different components such as cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective (Murray 2014). Besides, Littlewood (1999) distinguished between proactive and reactive degrees of autonomy.

These succinct explanations and definitions of autonomy are deemed important at this stage because learner autonomy in learner stories will be traced based on these components, degrees, and capacities.

6.3.1 Tracing Autonomy in Learners' Actions

The current investigation was designed to find out the relationship between blended learning and the development of learner autonomy. Autonomy has indeed manifested itself in different degrees, shapes, and versions. Learners showed a considerable capacity for autonomous learning in terms of the actions they performed in their learning context. This is supported in the literature on autonomy from a sociocultural perspective which emphasizes that learners are always in context, which shapes how they learn and subsequently exercise their autonomy (Oxford 2003; Teng 2019; Sharmin 2024). According to Oxford (2003) this approach “emphasizes the context of autonomy rather than the individual exercising it” (p.87), which suggests that rather than decontextualizing and individualizing learner autonomy, there should be consideration of how the context can support and encourage it. This approach is also supported in the work of Little (1999; 2000a) and Ushioda (2006), which builds significantly on Vygotsky’s theory, which explains that the development of learner autonomy happens through ‘interdependent’ and ‘socially mediated’ learning processes (Benson 2006).

I have discussed in the literature review chapter learner autonomy using ecological metaphor (Palfreyman 2014). I have established that an autonomous learner does not operate independently, and he is not completely free from his context. However, his interaction with his learning environment and all its elements determines how he exercises autonomy. From this perspective, learner autonomy is defined as “a capacity for intentional use in context of a range of interacting resources towards learning goals” (Palfreyman 2014, p. 4). This definition sheds light on three important elements of autonomous learning which were largely traced in learners’ behaviors and actions in the present study. First, intentional use entails that learners’ actions are informed, strategic, volitional, and non-determined. Learners interact independently and purposefully with their environment by being aware of the resources that are available to them. The findings of the current study revealed that learners exhibit varying degrees of awareness of the available resources, opportunities, and affordances in their learning context. Learners’ actions are not determined but rather volitional and based on their needs and preferences. Their decisions in their language learning process appeared to be informed and personalized. In addition, the analysis has provided an account of learners’ purposeful interaction with their learning environment by undertaking multifaceted actions and becoming more proactive

(Littlewood 1999) in seeking out resources as they engage in their blended learning experience. As findings showed in the previous sections, learners can evaluate the relevance of different resources and make informed decisions about which resources to use to enhance their learning. This improves their autonomy as they become more self-reliant and self-regulated in guiding their own learning paths.

The second important aspect of the definition is the range of interacting resources that are available in the language learning environment either materials resources like books, computers, internet, handouts, or social resources like a member of a family who has some knowledge about the subject matter, a friend, or a teacher. An autonomous language learner makes use of these resources and decides whether they are relevant to his purposes or not (Palfreyman 2014). This was clearly shown in the data as learners were able to establish what Van Lier (2004) referred to as a “direct relationship” with their learning environment by identifying and using a wide range of resources. For instance, learners facing difficulties in different language tasks, have strategically accessed materials and decided which one would facilitate the task and improve their learning. The findings in this study further support Palfreyman’s (2014) argument that resources interact with each other, as the analysis highlighted that learners often combine multiple resources to complete language tasks. For example, learners used digital resources to write emails or reached out via social media (material resources) to seek guidance from friends or teachers (social resources). This interconnectedness of resources illustrates that learners used different types of support made possible with different types of resources to meet their learning needs, thus enhancing their independence and self-regulation in learning.

Autonomy also supposes some sort of goals. Whether vague or modest, the learning goals provide direction for learners’ experiences and impact their affective factors like motivation, desire, and willingness to be engaged in learning. An autonomous learner will choose his own goals and build an identity on his own. This was also evident in the data presented in this study; Algerian EFL learners are aware of their goals in terms of what they want to do for their language learning. Such awareness helped them in identifying what resources they needed to accomplish their goals.

Palfreyman (2014) argued that this awareness is a basis for the application of cognitive, social, and affective learning strategies. I have noted in the previous section that learners used different language learning strategies namely cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. All learners

employ learning strategies; however, it has been argued that awareness in selecting and using the available language learning strategies is a characteristic of only autonomous and successful learners (Sinclair 1999). This awareness may be the result of learners' knowledge of themselves in terms of their preferences and what best works for them as well as the usefulness of the chosen strategy for their learning. Indeed, in the present research, learners' autonomous behaviors were demonstrated through their awareness and knowledge of language learning strategies use, selection and choice, and even evaluation. EFL learners for example demonstrated successful use of different language learning strategies especially during the online portion of EFL blended learning independently, and proactively. Some of the EFL learners reported using some blended technologies such as emails to seek help from a social resource which could be a friend or a teacher. They used the resourcing strategy purposefully as they found it useful for their learning and their needs. Therefore, these are good examples of learners' self-regulation capacity in terms of their own strategic efforts to manage their learning as well as their awareness in terms of the usefulness of a particular strategy, and its benefits to enhance their learning.

Autonomy also manifested vividly in learners' creation of their own interdependent learning systems. From an ecological perspective, Palfreyman (2014) argued that an approach to autonomy should move beyond an individual-focused perspective and consider how a group or community can evidence interdependent autonomy and become a learning system. In the present study, I have elaborated that EFL learners created their own language learning communities through the use of some blended technologies such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Learners in these groups provide support and help to each other which can contribute to successful language learning and autonomy stimulation as involvement in groups does not stifle autonomy however, it may stimulate it instead (Palfreyman 2014). This is a good example that such independent initiatives to learn collaboratively function as learning communities, in which each member of the group plays an important role in improving learning among other members. I will illustrate below such an interdependence.

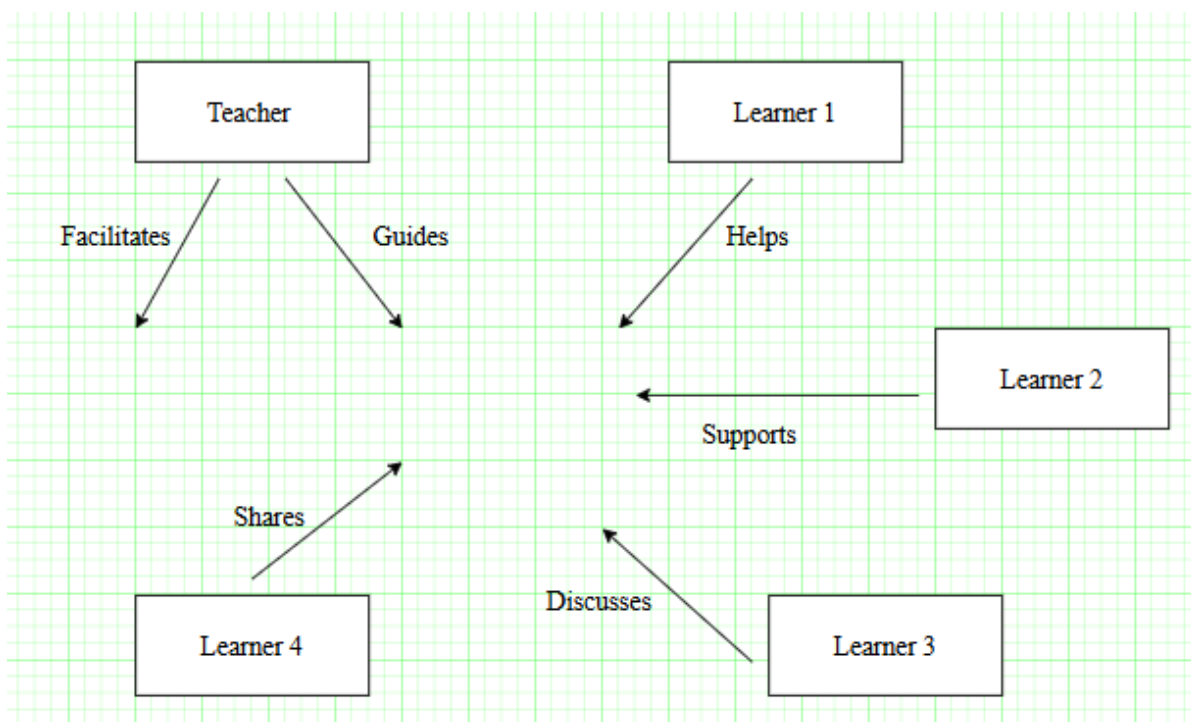


**Figure 13: WhatsApp and Facebook groups as language learning communities
(Adapted from Palfreyman 2014)**

The figure above illustrates the interrelationships and interdependence in one online group (this is a combination of patterns found among learners' actions in my study). The teacher, for example, guides his learners by providing feedback about learners' performance, he also facilitates learning for them by providing directions for them if needed and suggesting some ways to improve learning. Learners 1, 2, 3, and 4 on the other hand, help, support, and motivate each other as well as share and discuss different aspects of their learning. Learners for example reported doing activities and tasks collaboratively and helping each other; they also exchanged ideas and suggested resources and materials to improve each other understanding. In this context, the members of this learning community seem to be supporting each other's language learning in an ongoing exchange of different language learning-related aspects contributing to the improvement of individual learner autonomy. This aligns with Little's (1991) perspective on learner autonomy as a result of interdependence rather than independence. Regardless of any challenges the members of this learning system may have, situations like these provide a balance of mutual support and stimulation of learner autonomy.

Based on what I have discussed in this section, I have two main observations: firstly, the findings in this study as well as those generated by Sinclair (1999), Cotterall and Murray (2009), and Palfreyman (2014), suggest that learners do make use of the available resources in their learning context and use different language learning strategies which they are aware and

conscious of. This means that autonomy in learners' actions manifested itself in different degrees and shapes and can be evident in learners' awareness and knowledge of their learning context and characteristics as well as their capacity to make effective use of language learning strategies and self-regulate different learning tasks and situations, aligning their preferences, styles, and needs. Secondly, the findings of this investigation indeed support and validate my assumption that the social context in which learners study the English language plays a key role in the promotion of learners' language learning and autonomy. Such an assumption is based on Vygotsky's theory and Palfreyman's (2014) perspectives and is undoubtedly evident in this study. In this regard, Barab and Plucker (2002) argue that learners can be considered talented or untalented in relation to a particular activity and context rather than in the abstract. Therefore, the findings in this study emphasize that learners in the blended context have unprecedented opportunities to practice their autonomous behaviors and take charge of their own learning suggesting that blended learning provides a fertile soil to exercise autonomy. The discussion in this section on learner autonomy manifestation in learners' actions therefore suggests another dimension and perception of learner autonomy that needs to be carefully and critically approached taking into account the fresh insights provided by this study. That is the attention of research in the context under investigation should develop and focus on a broader view of learners' agency in context rather than on learners becoming free from their context. Researchers and teachers should accommodate a holistic perspective (Palfreyman 2014) which views learning as a system and locates it in a network consisting of teachers, learners, materials, and many other elements as well as within the individuals themselves.

6.3.2 Autonomy Manifestation in Learners' and Teachers Roles and Responsibility in a Blended Learning Context

So far, I have discussed autonomy manifestation in learners' actions, the second important area of investigation is their perceptions of their responsibilities and roles in learning English in a blended environment. The way learners described and perceived the roles they played in the blended context made it possible to trace evidence of their autonomy. Data analysis on this issue clearly revealed learners' active participation in the blended learning context. They described themselves as being active agents in their learning process. Furthermore, they interact purposefully with their learning environment and provided examples of some independent initiatives they engaged themselves in to facilitate their language learning such as choosing other learning materials and using other online resources such as social media and Google. The analysis of their perception of their roles has also revealed that learners show high levels of

awareness concerning the importance of being engaged and taking an active part in the learning process. They also made it evident that blended learning has impacted positively their roles as well as their profiles as language learners. This concurs with other study findings which reported the relationship between blended learning and the cultivation of language learners' autonomous abilities and roles (Benson 2007; Zhang and Wu 2009; Lai and Gu 2011; Lewis 2013; Rienties et al. 2018 and Shadieff and Yang 2020).

As for learners' perceptions of the responsibilities and roles teachers play in an EFL blended context, students acknowledged that the teachers play important roles in the learning process, however, they perceive them to have less authoritative roles compared to the roles they had in fully face to face learning. They reported that the teacher was a guide, feedback provider, and social resource with whom they could discuss things about their learning. Hence, although learners recognize the essential role of teachers in their learning, they appear to appreciate the new roles attributed to them and their teachers. They are no longer spoon-fed and consumers of teachers' knowledge in the EFL blended context, rather they act autonomously. Therefore, learners seem to favor autonomous learning and thinking over traditional learning methods in which learners play major roles and control everything. It can be noticed from the analysis that learners reject the over-dominance of teachers; this is indeed referred to in the literature on autonomy as learners' innate capacity for autonomous learning (Benson 2011; Little 1991). That is to say that learner autonomy is a natural attribute that every individual is characterized by (Benson 2011; Little 1991). Learners for example have positive attitudes towards the opportunity given to them in the blended context to learn autonomously although they are not used to such a way of learning. This in fact shows learners' natural readiness to embrace autonomous learning when given the chance to. According to Little et al. (2002), individuals are psychologically and biologically autonomous and they are self-contained thinking their own thoughts, not anyone else.

6.3.3 The Affective Driving Force toward Autonomy: Motivation and Willingness

The findings showed that although learners faced some challenges during their blended learning experience, they managed to proactively (Littlewood 1999) self-direct their own language learning. Motivation was one of the key factors that helped them in achieving their learning autonomously. Ushioda (2011) emphasized the relationship between autonomy and motivation and stated that by definition autonomous learners are motivated learners. Accordingly, autonomy is evident in the degree of motivation shown by learners when engaging with different aspects of their EFL blended experience such as tasks, activities, and

lessons. Learners for example mentioned different learning situations in which motivation helped them to effectively enhance their language learning process such as when doing some activities collaboratively with peers or while independently and proactively embracing technology to navigate their learning. The relationship between autonomy and motivation is commonly discussed in the literature; Littlewood (1999) for example argued that besides having the ability and skills to make educational choices, learners' willingness is another important factor to consider as it determines how motivated and confident learners are to take responsibility and complete those choices. The findings in the present study revealed that learners had a strong willingness driven by motivation to engage in the blended experience. Such attitudes would undoubtedly promote their autonomy because a direct relationship between learner autonomy and motivation was traced in the literature (Chan et al 2002; Ushioda 2011). Furthermore, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were traced in learners' reflections. Extrinsic motivation comes from factors such as the learning environment, technology use, and peers and intrinsic motivation comes from factors such as learners' own interests and preferences. Both types were considered to be important and essential for autonomous learning (Scharle and Szabo 2000).

So based on what has been discussed in this section, this study offers valuable insights into learners' positive emotional engagement, motivation, and autonomy in the context of EFL blended learning. Learners' proactive mindset, self-awareness, and motivation to use technology (Ushioda 2011) not only engage students emotionally but also empower them as autonomous and motivated learners who are eager to embrace innovative learning experiences regardless of some constraints.

6.4 Critical Reflections on the Findings

Firstly, it is important to note that the shift from passive to active learning observed in this study was not only the result of teachers' pedagogical practices and the presence of digital tools. However, the blended nature of the learning environment itself has also facilitated this transformation. Scholars such as Medina (2018) and Spring and Graham (2017) argued that blended learning stands as an active language learning approach because it integrates both synchronous- asynchronous online learning with offline, face to face learning instruction. The analysis in this study has revealed that the blend between these two learning environments has created new affordances for learners' engagement. It allowed learners to study at their own pace, participate actively in discussions with peers and teachers, and interact independently

with learning resources. The findings in this study suggest that it is the blend itself that offered a flexible and open learning environment that supports learners' autonomy. Learners were no longer restricted to the confines of the traditional classroom, instead they could engage in learning either virtually or physically. In the online environment, they managed their learning independently and interacted meaningfully with different elements that were available in their learning environment, while the face-to-face components allowed extended opportunities for collaboration, and guidance when needed. Beyond these functional affordances, the blend created also a psychological room that supported learners' autonomous behaviors. Learners felt empowered to make decisions and manage their own learning. This sense of ownership was reflected in their increased motivation and willingness to participate meaningfully and proactively in their learning process. Therefore, the blended nature of the learning environment enabled learners to take on a more active role, expanding the contexts where they could interact, make decisions, and take responsibility for their own learning. This aligns with Singh's (2003) argument that the blend of online and offline modes creates active and flexible learning approaches. Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2007) stressed that blended learning enhances the quality of learning experiences by enabling more active and effective learners' engagement. creates active and effective learning experiences through this integration.

Secondly, according to what has been discussed above and in the literature review, concerning language learners in the Algerian EFL context, it can be noticed that there is a discrepancy in findings in terms of how Algerian EFL learners' autonomous capacities are described in this study and how they were reported in other studies. The EFL literature in the Algerian context usually depicts Algerian learners as reluctant and lacking readiness and motivation to learn autonomously; besides, they tend to adopt passive learning approaches (Ghout-Khenoune 2014; 2015; Hadi 2014; 2018; Bensalem 2018). However, the learners' perceptions I investigated in this study offer fresh insights that should be approached carefully and critically because learners tend to enjoy learning autonomously and display active approaches and roles in learning English in a blended context. The analysis has revealed that they not only possess autonomous behaviors, but they also show awareness and apply them effectively to manage their learning. Furthermore, generally, they do not prefer methods of learning in which teachers 'spoon-feed' them. Therefore, the findings of this study emphasize that the type of context in which learning takes place shapes and determines how and to what extent learners apply these autonomous behaviors and capacities. This can be aligned with the perspective put forward by Lamb and Reinders (2007), which highlights that students' perceptions of learning are inherently linked to a particular context and they cannot be isolated from it. Sharmin (2024)

also supports this view, emphasizing that learners' perceptions and experiences are shaped by their specific learning environments and social interactions. This implies that learners change behaviors and develop as the surrounding learning environment develops focusing on the learning situation and the opportunities given for learners to learn autonomously. In this respect, Masciotra et al. (2007) argue that:

The learner [...] is understood as a person in action and in situation (PAS). The PAS is an integrated whole: A person is characterized by a power for action. This power is manifested in the person's action, and this action cannot be understood apart from the circumstances (the situation) in which the person finds herself. Where then is knowledge? It is in the whole PAS.

(p. 3).

One general observation could be made to understand why such a mismatch exists in the context under investigation. I critically realized that the studies I mentioned in the literature review chapter on autonomy in the Algerian educational context usually only interpret learner autonomy from one perspective, leaving no space for various understandings. The focus is much more on the individual learner considering a fully autonomous learner as one who operates independently from teachers, textbooks, and the classroom (Nunan 1997). Therefore, these studies offer little on whether their conclusions about learners' autonomous abilities represent learners' actual learning profiles and capacities or they merely reflect learners' reactive behaviors in the learning context where they learn. The analysis in this study therefore implies that those conclusions refer more to the latter. Important elements that are included in the learning process are neglected such as classrooms, teachers, peers, materials, and many others. This raises conceptual as well as methodological concerns in the context under study suggesting that different understandings, interpretations, and exploration of complex constructs such as autonomy are needed.

In terms of methodology, most of the studies that have been carried out in the context under investigation adopted only either quantitative methods such as questionnaires or qualitative methods like interviews. However, this may lead to superficial findings. In this respect, Sinclair (2000) argued:

[...] the adherence to solely quantitative research methods in the attempt to seek empirical proof of learner autonomy had led, in some cases, to inconclusive or even bizarre research results, which provide little in the way of useful insights.

(p. 14)

Therefore, to do justice to multidimensional notions like autonomy, appropriate research methodology needs to be used taking into account the phenomenon and the context being

studied. Gao (2007) points out that “The field has been challenged by its over-dependence on the survey method, which leads to a decontextualized, ahistorical, correlational picture of the learners” (p.193). Accordingly, the chosen methods for data collection should be flexible and cater to the specific context being explored as well as to the different ways in which learners interpret their educational experiences. Besides, there should be a consideration of the depth to which the chosen methods penetrate. Superficial methods would lead to superficial results and vice versa. Indeed recently, Chong and Reinders (2022) conducted a scoping review of 61 empirical studies on EFL learner autonomy and argued that most of the reviewed studies employed a single questionnaire or language tests being the most common instruments. They suggested using more qualitative research methods which could yield rich data on learners’ behaviors. Such methods would develop an evidence-based exploration of learner autonomy rather than measuring perceived autonomy (Chong and Reinders 2022).

Finally, the findings in the present study suggest that autonomy manifested vividly in both learners’ actions and perceptions. If autonomy in language learning is conceptualized as “a capacity for intentional use in context of a range of interacting resources towards learning goals” (Palfreyman 2014, p.4) and as a “capacity to make informed decisions about language learning (Sinclair 1999), then, one could argue that the learners being investigated used their capacity to intentionally make effective use of the available resources to promote their language learning and learn autonomously. The overall blended learning atmosphere encouraged autonomy in learners as reported by the learners themselves. Besides, if autonomy in learners can be judged in terms of their awareness and purposeful interaction with their learning context including teachers, peers, and materials, then the majority of the learners who participated in the present study can be said to be highly autonomous.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to presenting and interpreting Algerian EFL learners’ perspectives and practices in learning English within the Algerian higher education context, specifically, in blended learning environment. It presented and discussed the findings about the various manifestations of learner autonomy among these learners, highlighting their intentional actions, active roles, and high levels of willingness and motivation to learn autonomously. These behaviors indicate a readiness among Algerian EFL learners to engage with English learning in autonomy-supportive contexts such as blended learning. Furthermore, the findings discussed in this chapter emphasize the dynamic relationship and interplay between Algerian

EFL learners and the language learning environment they are in. The specific characteristics of the blended learning environment defined the degree to which Algerian EFL learners exercise autonomy.

Moving forward, research methodologies should consider the unique aspects of Algerian EFL higher education context and accommodate a holistic approach to understanding learners' behaviors and perceptions. Such an approach will better capture the complexity of constructs like autonomy in language education.

Chapter Seven: Cultural Influences: Autonomy in the Algerian English as a Foreign Language Context

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the way Algerian EFL learners study the English language in the unique educational context of higher education in Algeria. By exploring learners' practices and perspectives, the analysis aims to address the third research question which explores the elements that define the Algerian culture of EFL learning, and the extent to which these elements shape learners' approach to English language learning and influence the development of their autonomy. This would help assess whether the Algerian learning culture encourages or hinders the development of learner autonomy from the perspective of learners.

7.2 Presentation of the Main Findings

Each educational culture has its own defining characteristics and learning traditions. The analysis in this chapter explores the unique practices and values within Algerian higher education institutions with a particular focus on the dynamics shaping the language learning experiences of EFL Algerian learners in relation to their autonomy development. The analysis in this chapter is structured around two main themes. The first covers Algerian learners' perceptions and understandings of the concept of autonomy in EFL learning. The second addresses the challenges and barriers to learner autonomy. This includes exploring how educational and cultural barriers can either hinder or facilitate autonomy.

7.2.1 Autonomy in EFL Learning: Learners' Perceptions and Understanding

This section explores learners' own understanding of autonomy as a concept. I was interested to see how learners interpret autonomy, and how they perceive autonomous learning. Having an interest in exploring the notion of learner autonomy in the specific context of Algeria, it is important to investigate it from the perspectives of the learners themselves to discover whether this concept is perceived appropriately by learners.

Students had different interpretations and understandings of learner autonomy, as well as different perceptions of autonomous learning. Mostly, learners showed that they have a good understanding of what autonomous learning is. As a way to interpret the concept, learners have

discussed learner autonomy in relation to how they should be perceived and treated by teachers. According to them, learner autonomy means putting the students at the center of the learning process and handing the responsibility to them, this can be aligned with Holec's (1981) view that autonomy means that learners take responsibility for all aspects of their learning. In this respect, Chabha explained:

I think LA is about me being responsible for my learning and making more efforts to improve my learning not just going to the classroom and listening to teachers and learning content by heart. I think the teacher should give more priority to us as students and more attention. [Interview]

Most learners explained that responsibility for learning means that they are given some choices and freedom. Benson (2011) argued that autonomy is best defined as learners' capacity to take control of one's own learning referring to learners' power to make choices and take decisions related to their learning. In this regard, when asked about what she meant by priority and attention, Chabha said:

I want to say that they give us more freedom and allow us to express our ideas and preferences because I think autonomy needs to be encouraged inside the classroom also. [Interview]

Some of the students pointed out that autonomy means taking control of learning. When asked to explain what they meant by control Fahim stated:

As I student I would love it if I take more active parts in my learning like discussing, giving more presentations, and explaining the content. [Interview]

A key aspect of learners' understanding of autonomy is the significant role of teachers in nurturing autonomy. Teachers should encourage and help learners to become more responsible. This reflects the important role teachers play in fostering autonomy; Benson (2011), for example, suggested teacher-based approaches to enhance autonomy, which aim to redefine teachers' roles and transform them to stimulate learners' autonomous learning (Nguyen 2014). In this regard, learners have interestingly shown awareness of both their own roles and those of teachers in an autonomous learning environment. They acknowledge the importance of working independently, while still valuing the essential contributions of teachers to the process. This reflects learners' good understanding of autonomy and viewing it as a result of collaboration and interdependence, rather than working in isolation (Little 1991, Littlewood 1999; Teng 2019; Palfreyman 2014). This is evident in the following exchange:

Nourdine: *Autonomy for me means to study without a teacher and independently.*

Researcher: Do you mean that autonomous learners don't need a teacher?

Nourdine: Yes, for some aspects. Maybe the teachers are needed for guidance but most of the work should be carried out by learners. **[Interview]**

Additionally, most of the students hold positive attitudes toward being given opportunities to learn autonomously and taking more responsibility for their learning. Nourdine, for example, seemed to be satisfied with his teacher sharing responsibility over some aspects of his learning and related this to his academic achievement. He explained the following:

*I prefer the one who shares the responsibility with us at least in some topics like the type of activities we like, and methods we feel comfortable with. For example, I like my teacher of module xxxx because we sometimes prepare lessons, explain them in class, ask each other questions about them, and have discussions about them. We also prepare presentations, give them in class, and have discussions about them together. The teacher helps us if we have difficulties with lessons or exercises. I really like teacher xxx and his modules because I understand and get good marks. **[Interview]***

Therefore, the preference for shared responsibility in the learning process seems to represent the view of the majority of students because most of them seemed uncomfortable about the teaching methods being used and called for a change to make them more involved in the process. This is evident in the following exchange:

Researcher: Which types of teachers do you prefer, the ones who make all the decisions concerning your learning process, for example, teachers who decide what to learn and the type of activities, or the ones who share the responsibility with you?

Chabha: I prefer the type of teachers who would share with us some responsibility or at least encourage us to learn English in a different way.

Researcher: Different way?

Chabha: Yes, using different methods, and activities and suggesting some effective ways to improve our English like reading books, or preparing lessons that suit our preferences, I don't know but we need change. **[Interview]**

In this view, on the one hand, learners express a great sense of willingness to take some ownership of their learning and be involved in more autonomous supportive activities. On the other hand, their interpretation of learner autonomy seems to emphasize reactive autonomy and interdependence.

This section presented learners' interpretations of autonomy and their perceptions of autonomous learning and taking more responsibility for their learning. Their interpretation and

perceptions emphasized the multifaceted nature of autonomy which entails both individual responsibility and collaborative engagement. Moreover, their perspectives highlight the important roles teachers play in fostering autonomy. The following section will focus on factors affecting the development of Algerian EFL learner autonomy in the higher education context.

7.2.2 Challenges and Barriers to Autonomy: Learners' Experiences in the Algerian EFL Context

This section focuses on learners' perceptions of their educational context in terms of allowing or not allowing them to exercise their autonomous behaviors. It particularly discusses the potential constraints and barriers to the development of learner autonomy in the context under study. Indeed, when being interviewed, learners discussed and articulated these barriers explicitly, relating them to their reluctance in language learning. The analysis, therefore, revealed that learners are aware of the learning context around them and of themselves as learners in such a context. The exploration of the contextual constraints encompassed different elements from the learners' point of view. This includes the learners' roles, teachers' roles, teaching methods, and testing methods, all of which are going to be presented below. This theme explores how some educational and cultural elements influence the development of learner autonomy.

7.2.2.1 Restraining or Facilitating: The Role of EFL Educational Culture in Shaping Learner Autonomy

Teachers' Roles and Teaching Methods

Amongst the constraints that learners spoke about the most were teachers' roles and teaching methods. Most of the students reported that teachers dominate the learning process by controlling all the aspects of language learning which students perceive as being inappropriate for their level, this is illustrated in the following:

Chabha: Everything I mean they (referring to teachers) prepare lessons, they explain the lessons, sometimes they ask some questions, and they leave the classroom. Our teachers control everything sometimes I feel that I am the primary pupil because they treat us so. [Interview]

Accordingly, in this section, I was eager to explore the different ways teachers' roles affected the roles learners play especially in terms of encouraging or not encouraging them to learn autonomously and giving them opportunities to be engaged actively in the learning process. Nordinne has described himself as a listener and consumer of teachers' knowledge, and when asked about the things that he thought affected his roles, he explained the following:

Nourdinne: Sometimes all I do is listen to the teacher as he explains things for one hour and a half.

Researcher: What do you think affects your role?

Nordinne: Our teachers. Some teachers hinder us from working on the lessons, even doing activities together or talking about the topic. They just explain and ask questions, and when we respond, most of the time don't understand and simply repeat the responses without understanding. [Interview]

Another important perspective expressed by students was the idea that teaching had presidency over learning. The current teaching methods focus more on teachers and prioritize their roles, therefore, little attention and consideration are given to students, their preferences, and their needs. As such learners demand change in the teaching approaches. This is clear in the following:

The teaching methods should change to focus more on us as learners, give us more priority, more responsibilities, and simply be involved in the whole process. For example during the lectures we have in the amphitheatre, we are about 50 students and just the teacher who is speaking. We don't take part in anything. I think the methods used are not good. [Interview]

Similarly, Fahim claimed that his language learning environment is teacher-centered where teachers dominate the process leaving no room for learners' participation and engagement. The following extract makes it evident:

I think it was more teacher-centered because as a student I don't do anything except listen to the teacher who explains until time is finished. The teacher doesn't let us take part in the lesson he prepares everything. [Interview]

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that teachers are not encouraging independent learning, and they are to some extent unwilling to lose their authoritative profile. Teachers like to be perceived as the only source of knowledge and seem to impose some rules on students. This can be aligned with the findings generated by Bensalem (2018) highlighting teachers' hesitation to abandon their central authoritarian roles. Lamia has mentioned a situation that backs up this claim and shows that teachers encourage dependency rather than independence.

One day I couldn't understand the meaning of one word, and I was looking for it on Google when my teacher saw me she said xxx put your phone. It is forbidden to use the phone inside the classroom. When I told her that I was checking the meaning of that word. She said no why you didn't ask me? I don't know I didn't like her reaction I felt like I was being treated like a child. [Interview]

Nourdinne confirmed this and stated:

[...] because the teacher is expecting us to just sit quietly and listen to his explanation.
[Interview]

To summarize, the teachers' roles and teaching methods seem not to allow learners a room, and the opportunities to engage actively with their learning, and above all autonomously. They seem to encourage dependency rather than independence and they do not promote an autonomous supportive environment.

Curriculum

The curriculum was perceived by the students as a significant barrier to effective autonomous language learning due to its rigid structure and lack of flexibility. With a fixed timetable and predetermined content, students felt that they could not exercise any control over their learning or choose any aspect. Students reported that teachers come to the classroom with a fixed syllabus over which they had no control. This specific aspect hinders learners' engagement and prevents them from developing skills such as decision-making and self-regulation which are essential ingredients for learner autonomy. This is evident in the following:

Lamia: I can't choose when to study because we have a timetable that we have to respect [...] Like everything is fixed no chances to change or to decide anything.
[Interview]

Chabha: I already said we have lessons that we must finish before the exam period. The teacher prepares all the lessons and everything so I can't choose what to study and how. **[Interview]**

Furthermore, some students pointed out that teachers seem to prioritize the coverage of the content set in the curriculum over promoting critical and independent learning skills, which further restricts opportunities for autonomy. As such class time tends to be devoted to transmitting the content from teachers to students, leaving limited opportunities for discussions and interactions. Therefore, instead of actively participating in the learning process, learners are expected to follow teachers' instructions. Such a learning environment encourages passivity over independent and autonomous learning. This is well illustrated in the following example:

Fahim: Inside the classroom, we are limited in terms of what we can do because the teacher prepares everything. For example, when we want to discuss a topic, our teachers stop us and tell us we don't have time for this and we have other things to do. So we are limited in terms of the content as well.

To sum up, learners expressed their dissatisfaction with the restrictive nature of the curriculum,

which according to them not only hinders their autonomy but also excludes them from participating in the decision-making process.

Testing and Assessment Methods

Another type of impediment that learners perceive to hinder their language learning, and their autonomy is exam and testing methods. Learners perceive the assessment practices being used as discouraging their autonomy and they pointed out the specific assessment aspects that they believe inhibit their autonomous behaviors. For example, Chabha expressed dissatisfaction with the exam-based assessment methods, which according to her, focus on rote memorization

We have tests and exams for some modules just the final exam [...] It is all about learning all the lessons by heart and I don't like this. [Interview]

Hence, learners seem to not agree with these methods of testing which focus more on memorization of facts and knowledge. They rather prefer assessments that prioritize and promote their critical thinking and creativity. Besides, learners suggest that evaluation should be less final exam-centered and instead focus on ongoing evaluation of learners' performance and progress. This highlights learners' preference for assessment practices that consider continuous work rather than relying solely on a single exam day which may not accurately reflect learners' abilities. This is evident in the discussion I had with Lamia.

Researcher: Are you satisfied with this method of evaluation (referring to the final exam)?

Lamia: No, I dislike the type of questions in some modules.

Researcher: Why just for some modules?

Lamia: Because for some modules I like the evaluation methods because the questions are about reflection, analysis, and not memorization.

Researcher: Do you want to say that you are more comfortable with the testing methods that focus more on reflection and critical thinking?

Lamia: Yes, I prefer like this. It is better than memorizing the content.

Researcher: What do you think should change?

Lamia: I would like it to be less exam-focused. I mean I want to be assessed in terms of how I work during the whole semester or a year rather than on one day in which I can be sick and unwell. [Interview]

Furthermore, the testing methods also seem to emphasize measuring a limited set of the teachers' objectives and specific content which encourages teaching to the test approach. That

is to say that learners are being taught content that is likely to be included in exams, Fahim shared his experience of one of the teachers' evaluation methods saying:

I am going to speak about one teacher who gives us in exams 20 questions. We should answer the questions in 5 words. When we exceed the 5 words our answer is considered incorrect. This is unfair because it is killing our creativity. I should give back to the teacher what he gave me in a limited way. I usually get bad marks in this module because of this method of testing. It is a very bad method. [Interview]

This teacher seems to choose assessment formats and topics that align with his objectives, allowing no choice for learners on how they demonstrate their understanding. This might be considered an important constraint on learners' autonomy development.

In the same vein, Chabha expressed her hopes to use alternative testing methods rather than traditional ones. She seems to prefer methods such as project work and presentations that give learners some opportunities to exercise some control over their learning for example in selecting the topic that they are interested in and planning for the work :

I have a friend who is studying in France, and he tells me that they have final exams in a kind of work already prepared. Like they research a topic and prepare reports or present it. So, I think it is better than learning like parrots. [Interview]

It is evident that learners have their own preferences in terms of how they want to be assessed, they want to be given a voice as to what serves their interests and styles.

Another student had considered the attendance mark as a constraint to flexible learning. These kinds of rules may impact students' learning and their outcomes, Chabha mentioned the following:

Chabha: The attendance thing should be removed because I think it is wrong.

Researcher: Why do you think it is wrong?

Chabha: Like I can be absent for personal reasons and study at home independently and still it is ok. Expelling students from modules after 3 absences is crazy.

[Interview]

To summarize, learners perceive traditional exam-based methods as hindering their autonomy, and they advocate for alternative assessment methods that prioritize critical thinking and independent learning. Thus, such insights highlight the importance of reevaluating assessment practices in the EFL higher education context in Algeria to better support learner autonomy and other important skills.

7.2.2.2 Cultural Factors Hindering EFL Learner Autonomy

Family is the individual's first school where he lives and learns things. Furthermore, he practices his daily life activities within the community. Both the family and the community have certain cultural norms, attitudes, and behaviors that the individual brings to the language classroom. The analysis in this part presents some of the socio-cultural constraints that limit EFL learner autonomy development. The notion of respect has, for example, manifested itself in different ways.

Most of the students see teachers as the sole authority and source of knowledge in the classroom, with whom learners cannot engage in discussions about any aspect of their EFL learning. Such perspectives may inhibit the development of their autonomy. Chabha for example showed a higher order of respect to her teachers because of their knowledge and experience :

As a student, I can't discuss teaching methods with a teacher because he knows everything. [Interview]

This view is also echoed in the discussion I had with Wissam, who explained that even in cases of disagreement, she must be obedient to her teachers because this is seen as a sign of respect. This is evident in the following exchange:

Researcher: Can you for example discuss with your teacher something that you do not feel is good for you? Like an activity, content, exams

Wissam: No I can't do this because I trust my teachers and all that they prepare for me is appropriate [...] sometimes I'm not happy with some things but I can't complain because I respect my teacher. [Interview]

Learners also seem to accept the teachers' authority (due to their powerful profile) and obey their rules. Learners are not in a position to question or debate with teachers, who are the holders of power. The following exchange with Lamia makes it clear:

Researcher: Perfect, in your opinion, are there any cultural influences on your ways of learning in terms of what you are allowed to do and what are not allowed to do?

Lamia: I think yes because like the situation I have just told you about (referring to him looking up some words in the dictionary using his phone and the teacher stopped him), I was not allowed to discuss further with the teacher. I just apologized and told the teacher I will not do it again. I know that I didn't do something wrong, but I have to respect my teacher. [Interview]

The student was looking some English words up in the dictionary using her phone. She was not doing anything that she should be blamed for. However, the student apologized to the

teacher, which suggests that there is an inequality in power distribution and learners seem to be in a powerless position.

7.3 Discussion of the Main Findings

The findings revealed that learners have a good understanding of what autonomy and autonomous learning are. Besides, they were able to articulate the constraining forces that hinder the development of their autonomy in their local EFL context. From the data, I have identified two types of impediments, namely some elements of the Algerian EFL educational culture and some societal and cultural norms embedded in the Algerian culture.

7.3.1 Autonomy in EFL Learning: Learners' Perceptions and Understanding

It is argued that the concept of autonomy can accommodate different interpretations (Benson, 2001; Little, 1999; Sinclair, 2000). Therefore, it could mean different things to different people (Benson, 2001, 2007; Little, 1991). Therefore, it is deemed both useful and practical to investigate contextual understandings of autonomy through the learners themselves. I will try to interpret learners' understanding of autonomy and autonomous learning in light of the literature and as articulated and perceived by learners in their specific context. The findings in the present study highlighted learners' preference for autonomous learning and willingness to learn language in an environment which encourages autonomy and where teachers share responsibility and actively involve them in the decision-making process. Moreover, learners explicitly expressed their desire for a change suggesting that the current approach may not be fully meeting their expectations. The findings also reported their willingness to experience different ways of language learning. Willingness is indeed an essential ingredient in developing autonomy (Hsu 2005, Nguyen 2014). It illustrates learners' psychological and affective readiness (Little 1991) to embrace autonomous learning. Therefore, learners in this study are aware of the importance of being autonomous and responsible for their learning and they are ready and willing to embrace autonomous learning.

As for learners' understanding of autonomy, I have mentioned in the literature review that many scholars in the field of education and foreign language learning, in particular, have provided different definitions and perspectives on autonomy. It is referred to as an ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec 1981), capacity for independent learning and detachment (Little 1991), capacity to make informed decisions (Sinclair 1999), and autonomy entails awareness, relatedness, and interdependence (Little 1991; Palfreyman 2014; Teng 2019). Besides, autonomy has different versions: psychological, technical, political, (Benson 1997), and socio-cultural

(Oxford 2003) as well as different degrees (Nunan 1997; Littlewood 1996;1999). The findings show that learners' interpretations of learner autonomy differed and discussed different aspects such as responsibility, choices, freedom, and independent learning. Generally, they reported that they should be given chances to work independently under the encouragement and guidance of teachers. To evaluate learners' understanding of learner autonomy, I used two types of thematic analysis namely, semantic thematic analysis and latent thematic analysis (for more details about my analytical framework see section 4.6.4.1.1). At the semantic level, I was able to identify and describe the explicit meaning of learners' perspectives on autonomy, such as responsibility for learning and a willingness for greater choice. However, the latent level allowed me to explore the deeper, underlying meaning and contextual factors that shape these perspectives. This enabled me to reveal insights into how the educational environment influences learners' understanding of autonomy and allowed me to identify the key characteristics that learners perceive as representing autonomy. Therefore, I identified and summarized some of the characteristics of autonomy as perceived by learners in the following list:

- **Autonomy involves responsibility for one's own learning:** learners perceive autonomy as taking responsibility for their own learning, including working proactively outside the classroom and not just relying on teachers for knowledge.
- **Autonomy requires learners' centeredness:** learners related autonomy to learners-centeredness and active participation in the learning process such as giving presentations and explaining content rather than passively receiving information.
- **Autonomy involves opportunities for learners to make decisions and choices:** learners' perspectives on learner autonomy are linked to being allowed and given chances to make decisions and choices. This means that the context where learning takes place should give learners room to exercise their autonomous abilities, indicating the potential influence context may have on nurturing or stifling autonomy.
- **Autonomy is a right belonging to learners (Benson 2000):** learners perceive autonomy as a fundamental aspect of their educational experiences. This was evident in learners' preference for shared responsibility and their willingness to have a say in different aspects of their learning such as teaching methods, activities, classroom decisions, and so forth.
- **Autonomy needs to be encouraged inside and outside the classroom (Benson 2011):** autonomy often entails learners working independently outside the classroom, but it is not limited to that, it should be fostered inside the classroom as well.

- **Autonomy is being able to take control of one's own learning:** learners described autonomy as being able to control different aspects of their own learning, however, their perspective refers to the internal ability of learners and being fostered by the learning context. This means that for learners to effectively take control of their language learning process, they must possess the internal skills to do so, supported by an environment that nurtures and promotes autonomy.
- **Autonomy is related to interdependence rather than isolation:** The development of autonomy implies collaboration and interdependence, rather than working in isolation (Little 1991; 2000; Littlewood 1999; Teng 2019). While learners take control of their learning, they may still collaborate with others, seek guidance from teachers, or participate in group activities.
- **Autonomy means independent interaction with the available resources (Palfreyman 2014):** learners linked autonomy to their ability to engage with and use different language learning resources. It involves taking the initiative to access, select, and make use of different resources to improve their learning. This independent interaction helps learners regulate their own learning and avoid relying entirely on teachers.
- **Teachers' roles in nurturing autonomy:** While autonomy involves independence, learners recognize the significant role teachers play in fostering it, especially through guidance, encouragement, and shared responsibility.

It is worth noting here that these reflect only learners' own understanding and interpretation of learner autonomy in the context under investigation and it cannot be considered exhaustive as there is difficulty in getting a consensus on its conceptualization in the literature among scholars and there are areas which are still in an ongoing debate (Benson 2006). However, the list suggests learners' good understanding of autonomous learning principles.

From the above list, we can notice that learners' perceptions of autonomy entail support and encouragement from the educational environment. Such perceptions emphasize that having the ability alone is not enough to learn autonomously, but the educational system should give learners room to do so. Therefore, this view could arise from the learners' experiences in a system where autonomy is limited, highlighting a shift in expectations, especially after experiencing blended learning. Learners now advocate for more agency and control over their learning process. Furthermore, learners' perceptions accentuate the view that autonomy is context-dependent, by associating autonomy with the opportunities provided by the educational

environment. However, while learners express a desire for more freedom, choice, and control, their perceptions reflect the essential roles teachers play in guiding them throughout their learning journeys. This indicates an underlying belief that autonomy is a shared and negotiated process rather than absolute independence or isolation from the context.

Learners have also associated autonomy with their ability to interact and use different resources especially technology materials in this context, highlighting the importance of resource allocation in the language learning context. This suggests also that blended learning offers learners different affordances that shape how learners perceive the process of becoming autonomous. Therefore, learning environments where many affordances are provided to learners could bridge the gap between traditional and autonomy-supportive practices. Interestingly learners did not explicitly refer to the psychological aspects that are often associated with autonomy in the literature such as motivation and psychological readiness, however, the way learners interpret the concept and their explicit desire to be engaged in autonomous learning could suggest an underlying readiness and motivation to embrace autonomous learning. This indicates that, when interpreting autonomy, learners may have focused on the elements they perceive as lacking in their learning experiences.

The usefulness of this lies in its valuable insights into how learners view and interpret the concept in the context under study. These findings could encourage researchers to enrich the theoretical definitions of learner autonomy by addressing context-specific understandings and incorporating learners' perspectives. It can also enlighten educational practices in fostering autonomy by addressing learners' needs and expectations such as being involved in decision-making, maximizing resources ...etc). To put it simply, the list emphasizes the importance of context in shaping autonomy.

7.3.2 Challenges and Barriers to Autonomy: Learners' Experiences in the Algerian EFL Context

The discussion in this section considers the influence of the Algerian learning culture on the development of Algerian EFL learners' autonomy. Listening to learners speaking about their language learning experiences can be useful as it provides an authentic image not only of their language learning situation including the factors that might have a direct impact on their autonomous language learning process but also of themselves, their thinking, and reflecting abilities in relation to English language learning in their specific context.

From the learners' point of view, the language learning environment in the context being

studied presents significant educational and social factors that impact their learner autonomy. The findings revealed that learners perceived their language learning context as discouraging them from learning autonomously. This may be associated with some elements in their educational culture that are not in favor of autonomous learning. The analysis has, therefore, revealed an exhaustive list of elements learners perceive as constraints for their language learning. These aspects are discussed to help understand why Algerian learners display a passive role in their learning, so as not to build assumptions on their profiles and practices.

Learners defined their language learning as a process in which teachers directly transfer information and knowledge to them. They play passive roles, and few opportunities were given to them to take control over some of their learning aspects because according to learners the teaching methods were poor and inflexible and focused on teaching rather than learning. The analysis revealed that teaching modes are imprinted by a transmission tradition where learners are characterized by being passive and dependent. Teachers seem also to keep hold of their traditional roles and learners perceive them as one of the important constraints negatively influencing their autonomy development. Authority, responsibility for the teaching and learning aspects, and fear of losing control are the characteristics of teachers in the context under investigation. These findings are in agreement with those generated in the Algerian EFL context (Benaissi and Fedj 2018; Ghout-Khenoune 2015; Bensalem 2018; Benchaa 2020). Bensalem (2018) for example, conducted a study to investigate teachers understanding of learner autonomy and their efforts to promote it. The findings highlighted teachers' hesitation to abandon their central authoritarian roles. The same findings were also generated in Benchaa's study (2020) where he postulated that both teachers' and learners' roles are mediated by traditional educational beliefs: teachers' roles are still the same in teacher-centered approaches such as knowledge provider, correcting mistakes and managing whole class teaching, while learners are still passive and recipients of knowledge.

Furthermore, learners described their learning environment to be curriculum-based discarding them from taking active parts in their learning process. In their view, the curriculum sets a predetermined sequence of lessons and subjects that teachers have to follow, and that students are expected to receive. Hence, classroom practices including interaction, instructions, and activities are oriented by already prepared syllabi by the teacher. Learners could not control any aspect of their learning. Besides, little or limited opportunities were there to explore different topics using different resources and materials, especially inside the classroom. In this respect, Chettoune (2019) argued that on the one hand, autonomy in language learning

emphasizes the freedom to choose what and how to learn, on the other hand, one should ask how this can be achieved in a language learning environment governed by rules, teaching methods and syllabi to follow. This highlights the potential constraints imposed by a structured educational environment. It is, therefore, important to ensure that students' learning is the focus and consider how to balance between providing space for learners to learn autonomously while ensuring that they still receive necessary guidance and support.

Moreover, learners see the rigid exam and evaluation system as another important impediment. They noted that the focus on exams influences teaching and learning processes because teachers and learners work toward meeting exams' requirements. Teachers were preparing lessons that are likely to be included in exams and learners memorize information because such exams tend to measure knowledge retention rather than critical thinking and understanding. Learners expressed their dissatisfaction with the current testing and assessment methods that are focusing on memorization and passive skills and neglecting other creative skills. The students also reported that they were not given choices to have different assessment methods such as project work, and presentations. They indeed expressed a willingness to be tested differently using methods that allow them to exercise control over their learning and to be flexible to some extent. Therefore, the analysis revealed that there is a gap between the testing methods being used and the students' expectations. Similar findings were also reported by Ghout-Khenoune (2021) who postulates that students learning culture including testing culture, shaped their perceptions about themselves as learners, their teachers' roles, and their readiness for autonomy.

Finally, one of the socio-cultural aspects that is believed to hinder autonomy development in the context under study is the misunderstanding of the notion of respect. Showing respect to elderly people (the teacher in this case) is one of the characteristics of the Algerian classrooms. Indeed, the notion of respect is very important as a social and educational norm, however, when it is misinterpreted, it may act as a barrier to promoting responsibility and independence in learning. Learners seem to misinterpret the notion of respect and relate it to discussing important things about their learning with their teachers. Learners for example cannot question content, correct mistakes, and be flexible as to what to use for their learning and they tend to avoid disagreement with teachers. In this regard, Palfreyman and Smith (2003) argue that in some cultures respecting the elderly (teachers in this case) is considered a hindrance to autonomy development and leads to passivity. These findings are in agreement with the literature on social impediments to learner autonomy (Benaissi and Fedj 2018, Benaissi 2015, Benchaa 2020, Ghout-Khenoune 2018). Social status is highly respected in the local culture to

the extent that learners do not have the right to question teachers who hold an authoritarian status because learners “progress is in a culture of the group, the family, the community; decides with parents (family) and shares experiences with others” (Benaissi 2015, p. 412). Therefore, their approach to learning is affected by such beliefs.

Depending on what has been discussed above, learners’ perceptions of potential constraints to autonomy in their learning context unveil important facts, among which:

- Listening to learners speaking about the characteristics of their experiences when learning English in this specific context of Algeria demonstrates their strong awareness and critical thinking. Learners, for instance, could identify the factors they see might impact their autonomy development and call for a change. Learners, when reporting some learning situations, seem to use cognitive and analytical abilities such as reflecting, criticizing, comparing, analyzing, and evaluating what they see as ineffective in their learning process.
- The findings in this study, suggest that there is a relationship between the characteristics of Algerian educational culture and learners’ autonomous practices. While in the previous chapter, I have traced evidence of autonomy in learners in the blended context, there appear to be some constraining forces that inhibit this autonomy in some other learning situations. Therefore, the learning context and autonomy have a direct relationship in the sense that exercising autonomy is conditioned by the learning context (Sharmin 2024). Regardless of their internal abilities for autonomous learning, learners are likely to depend on teachers because teaching methods and evaluation methods encourage such a direction. Learners in this study have shown a good understanding of what autonomous learning is, however, they are not given room to learn independently, creatively, and critically. Learners shared some examples of teachers discouraging them from using other resources or discussing topics of interest. As a result, they tend to adopt easier learning approaches and accept dependency. The learning environment can be seen as a determiner of the type of learning behaviors learners show. This specific claim can be backed up by the views of Smith (2003) and Benson (2009a), who argue that some educational practices inhibit and suppress some aspects of learning in learners. Therefore, learners may have the ability to learn autonomously but may not choose to because the surrounding environment does not support them in doing so. For example, while learners seem to do different independent initiatives to learn independently and reduce their reliance on teachers, learners’ perceptions made it clear that their learning

environment including the teacher still expects learners to have the role of listeners. In other words, teachers still see learners as docile individuals and as objects. On this issue, Smith (2003) argued that instead of blaming learners and running to conclusions that they are not ready to learn autonomously and lack autonomous capacities, the approach could be the one to criticize:

If learners in a particular context do not appear to respond well to a particular approach to developing autonomy, this – in itself – is no reason to assert that they lack autonomy or that the goal of autonomy is inappropriate: it might be the approach which needs to be criticized, not the students or the validity of autonomy itself.

(p.130).

Therefore, the challenges to learner autonomy are not necessarily related to learners' willingness and ability, but rather to the political and social issues involved in changing established language learning and teaching practices (Benson 2011). This is well supported by Arab's (2023) study which highlights that in the Algerian Higher educational context, the primary fault lies with the entire system rather than the learners. This is because both educational and societal systems shape learners' character through the use of spoon-feeding which persists throughout various stages of their educational life.

- The higher educational context has failed in promoting the learning habits and type of learners that both policy and learners expect especially in being allowed to make some choices during their learning process. Policy documents and educational reforms in the context under investigation outline clear and explicit expectations for autonomy (Idri 2012; Hadi 2018). Educational practices are expected to nurture autonomy and independent learning. I have discussed in the literature review the educational reform that took place in Algeria in the academic year 2004-2005 and the adoption of the LMD (Licence - Master- Doctorate) system. Chettoune (2019) maintains that this system reflects temporary thinking and practices in EFL. Hadi (2018) asserts that LMD promotes learner-centeredness, attributes to teachers the role of facilitators, monitors, and guides, and enhances interaction in the classroom. In addition, the new learning system in Algeria promotes continuous and ongoing assessment in which evaluation and assessment of skills and knowledge are done through continuous monitoring rather than final examinations (Sarnou et al 2012). Project works were also introduced, and

learners were encouraged to do more self-directed and self-regulated tasks. Therefore, more interactive, engaging, and motivating language learning experiences were expected. Notwithstanding, one important fact, is that in practice, EFL education in Algeria is not aligned with what reforms advocate. After nearly two decades of the implementation of the LMD system, autonomy is still unachieved. This is reflected in Hadi's (2018) view that the system failed to achieve the assigned objectives. Similarly, Idri (2012) argued that "Despite the fact that the LMD system is based on a learner-centered approach, Students are still receptive and not productive" (p. 2181). Ghout-Khenoune (2015) investigated Algerian teachers' understanding of autonomy and concluded that teachers have positive theoretical readiness for learner autonomy but limited practical knowledge about how to implement learner autonomy principles in their classes. Such conclusions may justify why the educational learning environment in Algeria is still teacher-centered. Teachers lack the necessary practical knowledge on how to engage learners in the learning process and develop in them the skills necessary for effective autonomous language learning. Finally, learners' views on barriers to autonomous learning in the present study confirmed that although EFL educational practices in Algeria have changed in theory, they persisted in their traditional approaches in practice. Thus, traditional teaching and learning methods still exist and persist.

In a nutshell, one important finding is that learners being researched are aware of the characteristics of their learning environment and they are critical enough to depict what inhibits their way to autonomy. What is important here though, is that the list of factors learners provided needs to be taken seriously by different stakeholders especially teachers so that the efforts of enhancing learners' autonomous behaviors prove effective. The findings also call for further research on learners' practices in a fully face-to-face learning environment to understand deeply the nature of the relationship between the learning context and the hindering of learner autonomy. While learners' perceptions in this study provided an authentic image of their learning situation, a deep exploration and understanding of their practices would yield a better understanding of what they actually experience in reality.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on presenting and discussing the defining characteristics of the EFL educational culture in Algeria from the learners' point of view. Although learners expressed

their readiness and willingness to learn autonomously, they face significant barriers within their EFL educational context. These barriers include teacher-centered approaches, rigid exam-based methods of testing, curriculum constraints, and socio-cultural constraints. The following chapter will explore how the implementation of blended learning has brought about significant changes in these areas, potentially reshaping the learning environment and addressing some of the challenges highlighted in this chapter.

The findings highlighted a gap between educational policies and EFL practices in Algeria, suggesting a need for more focused efforts to bridge this gap. This can be done by empowering both learners and teachers through creating environments conducive to autonomous learning. Therefore, this study attempts to shed light on more effective educational practices in Algeria by suggesting a learning model that helps reshape the educational context towards more autonomous practices namely blended learning.

I have elaborated in the previous chapters that blended learning offers a pathway to enhance autonomy (see details in chapters five and six). Therefore, by integrating technology and adopting flexible learning approaches such as the ones in blended learning, the Algerian EFL educational system can better address these inherent limitations and constraints.

Chapter Eight: Blended Learning in the Algerian Higher Education: The Shift from Tradition to Innovation during COVID-19 Period

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the major changes that occurred within the Algerian EFL educational environment with the implementation of blended learning. The exploration of the areas affected by this change is my interest. I indeed consider it an important agenda item after having presented the characteristics of Algerian educational culture. Therefore, this chapter aims to address the last question of this research which looks at how the widespread use of blended technologies as a result of COVID-19 impacted Algerian EFL learning culture and the fostering of autonomy. I might to some extent have demonstrated the changes at the level of learners specifically in terms of their roles, practices, and attitudes in chapters five and six. However, I focus here on the changes in the culture of EFL language learning in terms of activities, testing methods, teaching methods, and other aspects which I will present below. Furthermore, my focus is on whether learners are aware of the significant changes that took place in their educational life and how they perceive it. Therefore, this category differs in that it discusses the change in learners' EFL learning culture in reference to learners' previous learning experience namely fully face-to-face learning. However, because the issues investigated in this study are interrelated and overlapping, the analysis and discussion presented herein will inevitably refer to some areas discussed in the earlier chapters.

At the beginning of this chapter, it is crucial to emphasize that my aim is not to compare between fully face-to-face learning environment and a blended environment, but to draw attention to and highlight the differences between the two language learning contexts and provide insights into them with a special focus on the fostering of EFL learners' autonomy from the viewpoints of the learners.

8.2 Presentation of the Main Findings

After analyzing the entire set of data, the changes that have taken place within the Algerian EFL educational environment following the implementation of blended learning are structured around four main areas. This includes EFL teaching methods, language learning activities, assessment methods, and the allocation of language learning materials.

8.2.1 Exploring Teaching Methods and Decision-Making

The shift from traditional face-to-face language learning to blended language learning has significantly affected teaching practices. One of the most notable changes was the integration of technology into language teaching and learning. It seemed that there was more focus on learners' learning process rather than teaching in the blended context. Furthermore, in the previous chapter on barriers to learner autonomy development, learners seemed to have a clear vision of what discourages their autonomy. One of the main constraints learners talked about was the teaching methods used. They reported that they were not given a say and were not involved in the decision-making process in fully face-to-face learning (for more details see Chapter Seven). The following exchange illustrates this issue:

Researcher: Do you think you can choose what to study, when, and how or not? To what extent?

Wissam: No, I can't because these things are my teachers' decisions. They decide about our learning. [Interview]

However, in blended learning, traditional teaching methods have been transformed into more modern approaches by incorporating technology into the language teaching and learning process. One prominent tool is the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment Moodle, a Learning Management System (LMS). Additionally, other online platforms and social media, such as Facebook, Zoom, and Google Meet were used as LMS. Teachers posted lectures, uploaded assignments, and provided feedback on these platforms enabling learners to access materials at their own pace. Thus, encouraging flexibility and independent learning. The newly adopted teaching methods foster a collaborative language learning environment by allowing learners to engage in discussions, ask questions, and interact with peers. On this issue, Nourdinne explained:

Teachers use Moodle to deliver lessons and sometimes they post lessons on Facebook groups. We had some meetings with teachers online, we discussed the lesson with teachers and peers. Sometimes we do presentations on ZOOM meetings and teachers give feedback. [Interview]

Furthermore, learners reported their positive experiences of using Moodle for studying English. They explained that accessing lessons and submitting assignments were manageable tasks for them allowing for more effective language learning experiences. This is evident in what Chabha explained:

Researcher: How did you find the experience of studying English in Moodle?

Chabha: It is good because I just log in and I find all the lessons, assignments, and different materials. [Interview]

Chabha has further elaborated that she could upload assignments and receive feedback through the platform, thus ensuring constant record-keeping:

[...] and I also upload my assignment there and get feedback. [Interview]

In blended learning, learners were engaged in online learning off-site instead of traditional homework. This helped them get familiar with the content and the materials available online, either on Moodle or other platforms. Subsequently, they attend face-to-face sessions for interaction and increased collaboration and guidance from teachers and peers. On this issue, Lamia explained:

[...] And sometimes we arrange face-to-face meetings, and we go on campus for the face-to-face time for discussions and guidance. [Interview]

From the students' perspectives, teaching methods in blended learning involve learners in the decision-making process, especially concerning how much voice learners were given in where, how, and when to learn. Therefore, one notable change that affected learners' learning traditions is the shift toward more, independent, personalized, and self-paced learning. The following exchange makes it clear:

Researcher: What about decision-making? Were you more engaged?

Nourdinne: Yes, because in blended learning I can decide when and where to learn for example. I can access teachers' material when it is convenient for me. I can control my pace of learning (silence) I can also use resources I want to facilitate my learning. So yes, I am free to organize my learning in some way or another. [Interview]

Moreover, learners perceived that the integration of information technology and multimedia into teaching and learning encourages their engagement and involvement in the decision-making process. Blended language learning with its outside classroom phase, is perceived by learners as particularly important for encouraging engagement and providing opportunities for additional activities. However, students also value face to face phase, for collaboration and guidance. That is, learners can navigate their learning independently online while still having access to teacher support and validation during face-to-face sessions. The following exchange makes it evident:

Researcher: What about decision-making? Were you more engaged?

Chabha: Yes, I think so. There is more focus and more engagement from me as a student. I was not limited in terms of what I do and how I do it. I study away from teachers so I can do extra activities to understand more especially with the help of the internet. Teachers prepare lessons but since I am outside the classroom I can do extra things to understand more.

Researcher: Do you think that outside learning is more effective?

Chabha: I can say yes because blended learning, for example, has the outside classroom phase and it gives students some freedom in terms of what to do and how to do it. The extra readings and activities helped me a lot in learning new things.

Researcher: What about the face-to-face phase?

Chabha: Yes, the face-to-face is also good because I can check with my teacher if I am in the right way and If I am doing things correctly. So, it is good to have the two, face-to-face and outside learning. [Interview]

All in all, the adoption of blended learning has transformed the emphasis of pedagogical practices from teaching to learning, thus cultivating a more student-centered learning culture, and consequently empowering learners to control and take charge of their learning.

8.2.2 Learners Experiences with EFL Language Learning Activities

The analysis in this section revealed the variety of language learning activities introduced through the implementation of blended learning leading to an increase in learners' engagement and control over their learning. The fully face-to-face learning offered limited engagement in language activities, Chabha, for example, reported that activities were not a prominent feature in her language learning experience:

Activities we did not do a lot of activities. As I told you the teacher comes into the classroom, explains the lesson using some handouts and that is it. [Interview]

Lamia noted that they were assigned some project work, but engagement in such activities remains limited as they are not integrated into regular classroom routine, as evident in the following:

Activities, we are not engaged in too many activities sometimes we have some project work to do. [Interview]

However, online quizzes, glossaries, wikis, multimedia projects, and discussion forums are just a few examples of how language learning activities become more varied in the blended context. Learners for example reported being more involved and engaged in different activities

including group work, presentations, and research-based activities. Nordinne highlighted this variety and explained:

I think the activities are different depending on the modules. We had some group work, presentations, essay writing, researching topics, and other activities like reading articles and watching YouTube explanation videos which make us all busy and engaged. [Interview]

The use of such engaging language activities provides varied and rich exposure to the target language and makes the learning process enjoyable and dynamic. In addition, these activities not only increase learners' engagement but also provide them with chances to exercise some control over some aspects of their learning, addressing previous dissatisfaction with the insufficient opportunities learners had to control their learning in a fully face-to-face setting (see details in chapter seven). Therefore, the use of varied learning activities has given learners unprecedented chances to have some freedom and choices in terms of what and how to learn. On this issue, Toufik explained the following:

My favourite activities in my EFL blended learning experience are project work (sometimes it is individual and sometimes group work). I like this activity because I usually select a topic that I like, I make a good plan for it, I gather information about it, I prepare a good presentation. It is a kind of individual activity in which I am free in terms of what I choose and how I want to do the task. [Interview]

Finally, we have also seen in the previous chapter that learners complained about not having room for independent learning in a fully face-to-face setting. Their learning is based on what teachers choose for them. However, in Blended learning, learners chose activities independently, and again technology was the primary tool that they seemed to rely on more and use to have access to both material and social resources. Learners were engaged in collaborative and interactive online and offline activities. This is evident in the following:

Yanis: I was also doing some online grammar quizzes. I was also engaged in some activities like writing essays and doing project work which I discuss with my friends via social media. [Interview]

In summary, the implementation of blended learning has significantly transformed an important aspect of the Algerian culture of learning namely language learning activities. By integrating various offline and online language tasks, learners experience a rich, supportive, and more engaging educational context. The examples mentioned by learners highlighted that the language learning activities used increased flexibility, promoted collaboration and independent learning, and fostered some autonomy aspects.

8.2.3 Learners Experiences with EFL Language Assessment Methods

Before moving on to how blended learning affected exams and assessment methods, it is worth noting that learners were not satisfied with their previous testing methods, and they expressed their desire to be assessed differently. This includes the use of alternative methods such as project work, presentations, and research-based works. Furthermore, learners wanted the testing methods to focus on critical thinking rather than memorization. As such, I was interested in exploring how the use of blended learning affected the assessment methods. The analysis revealed that blended learning has the potential to meet learners' expectations and desires because there was a change in how learners were evaluated. Lamia, for example, reported that the testing methods in the blended context include various tasks to complete outside the classroom. Instead of traditional on-table and paper-based tests, online quizzes, project works, presentations, and many others were used.

Yes, for some modules I didn't have a final exam on the table. But I did some other types of exams like presentations, essays, investigations, and reports. [Interview]

Therefore, the summative assessment taking place at the end of the entire course was reshaped. Teachers had two options: either to use on-table written tests or to evaluate students through alternative methods such as final projects, research assignments, and group work. Although the majority of the teachers opted for the new form of assessment, few teachers preferred to conduct traditional written tests. This is evident in the following extract:

Fahim: Yes, for most modules it was submissions. Like we didn't have a final exam as before. For some modules, it was on the table final exam. [Interview]

Learners seem to appreciate the change because the focus of testing was not on their retention ability. This is evident in the following exchange:

Chabha: Yes, for some modules we didn't have a final exam like to learn by heart and go sit at the desk and throw up what I learned. For some modules, we completed just some group or individual work from home like project work, essays, and writing reports.

Researcher: Are you happy with this method of testing?

Chabha: Yes, of course, I am more than happy because I do not like the memorization thing. [Interview]

It is therefore evident that assessment methods in blended learning introduced a shift away from memorization to focus on the application of knowledge, creativity, collaboration, and learners' critical thinking.

Furthermore, learners reported that the testing methods used in the blended context allowed them to choose topics of their interest, plan for their tasks, and work at their own pace. This is an aspect that learners see as contributing to effective language learning. Hence, the adopted methods of evaluation give learners a choice in terms of when and how to complete assessments leading to an increased control of the learning schedule, and decision-making, thereby autonomy. This is strongly backed up by the existing literature, Benson (2011) for instance argues that the use of such assessment tasks makes learners realize that they are responsible for the accomplishment of the tasks which is an important issue in developing autonomy in learners. Final projects, for example, completed either individually or collaboratively, require learners' control of their projects from start to finish. The process includes planning, researching, organizing, and presenting the final outcome. Fahim has further elaborated on this aspect and stated:

I prefer submissions because we choose topics we like, we organize the work the way we like, and we work from home at our pace. I could produce good work. [Interview]

In conclusion, the implementation of blended learning has significantly affected the testing culture in the EFL learning context of Algeria. Moving from traditional exam-based methods to diverse alternatives such as projects, presentations, and online quizzes, learners' expectations for evaluations that emphasize critical thinking over rote memorization were met. The new methods promoted greater engagement and enhanced autonomy by allowing learners to manage their evaluation tasks and choose ways to demonstrate their understanding. Therefore, the use of diverse assessment methods creates more responsive, supportive, and effective evaluation practices that foster a culture of continuous and flexible learning.

8.2.4 Resource-Rich Environment: EFL Language Learning Materials

I move on to another area that has been affected by the adoption of blended learning which is materials use and learners' interaction with them. Instead of discussing material use in the earlier sections, I decided to have it as a separate heading because material use plays a significant role in the context of blended learning generally and in the context of this study particularly. This study regards learners' interactions with materials as an important aspect of language learning autonomy (Palfreyman 2014), therefore it is deemed preferable to have a focused analysis of the material used in both fully face-to-face learning and blended learning.

The analysis has revealed that there is a reliance on physical and printed materials in fully face-to-face learning which seems to affect learners' motivation. Learners expressed their desire for

a modern classroom that adopts digital resources. Chabha has for example stated:

[...] Some teachers prepare long handouts, and they start reading some I do not understand at all [...] I do not know exactly which materials are better but the use of the handouts is boring. Maybe some videos, I do not know but like using technology, multimedia rooms, more modern ways of learning. [...] That is why even the materials used also affect my roles. The use of handouts makes me bored and not interested.
[Interview]

Additionally, in fully face-to-face learning material use is limited to what teachers choose.

Lamia: So, inside the classroom, we are very limited in terms of the materials we can use. **[Interview]**

However, we have seen in chapter six that blended learning provides learners with a variety of resources with which learners interact purposefully and make beneficial use. Hence, I was keen to explore explicitly how learners perceive the benefits of the available online resources. Interestingly, learners had much to share on how well online materials enhance their learning. They indeed acknowledged their value and advantages. Generally, learners had positive attitudes toward the online materials and perceived them as valuable sources of knowledge. As such, I asked learners if they thought online resources could complement teachers' materials and enhance their language learning. They all had no doubts about this and acknowledged the contribution of for example Social Networking Sites (SNS) and online websites in effective language learning. This is evident in the following extract:

Lamia: They helped a lot because I was using a lot of mobile applications, websites, TikTok, and Facebook pages that spread content about different aspects of language learning. They are very helpful. **[Interview]**

Other students considered the online materials available in blended learning as a source of information that can facilitate their path toward more independent learning. Fahim for example acknowledged that instead of over-relying on the teacher, he prefers to resort to online materials. However, he did not ignore completely the teachers' roles. This is evident in the following exchange:

Fahim: The online resources are so helpful because they provide all I need for my learning. Instead of bothering the teachers with questions and emails, I prefer to resort to Google and other online resources.

Researcher: Do you think that online resources can replace the teacher?

Fahim: No but I ask the teacher when I need guidance. When teachers guide me, I can use the online resources to improve my understanding. Also, the teacher is always

needed because the content and the curriculum are prepared by him. [Interview]

Wissam shared the same perceptions and argued that the materials that are available in the blended context helped her to be independent:

I am the type of learner who is dependent on my teachers, but this experience teaches me to use other things to facilitate my learning and this is possible by the use of online resources. [Interview]

It seems that teachers also encouraged independent learning and engagement with the language beyond the confines of the classroom in the blended context by recommending and suggesting additional materials such as book titles, articles, and links. This is evident in Lamia's statement

[...] Some teachers for example suggest some book titles, articles, and links to some useful resources and materials [...]. [Interview]

To summarize, integrating digital technologies into learning brings significant changes in what materials are used and how learners interact with them. Materials in face-to-face learning are predominantly physical and accessibility is usually limited to the physical presence of both teachers and learners. However, blended learning materials are often digital and accessible anytime and from anywhere promoting greater flexibility in learning.

8.3 Discussion of the Main Findings

The findings indicate that blended learning affected positively the language learning culture in the context under study. Besides, there was a clear consensus amongst learners that blended learning innovated their learning environment contributing not only to the effectiveness of language learning but also to the fostering of independent learning and self-reliance as well as their motivation. This is in agreement with the available literature on the effect of blended learning on the EFL learning environment. Different studies revealed that blended learning enhances the learning environment which plays a vital role in the fostering of the learning process as well as the fostering of autonomous and independent learning (Zhang and Zhu 2018; Akbarov et al. 2018; Ja'ashan 2015). From the data, I have identified four areas which stemmed from learners' perceptions of change. This mainly entails redirecting teaching methods, innovating language learning activities, restructuring the exam and evaluation methods, and material use.

8.3.1 Exploring Teaching Methods and Decision-Making

One of the most important changes within the Algerian educational culture is the teaching methods. Teaching methods in blended learning were redirected towards a student-centered

pedagogy where technology is used to enhance language learning experiences. Technology is an important driving force in the blended context as it provides many platforms and applications that teachers can use to enhance teaching and learning processes.

The findings in this study revealed that Algerian higher education institutions have introduced online management learning systems such as Moodle in teaching English. According to Brandle (2005), Moodle is used to encourage teachers to create quality online instruction, making an essential component of the blended learning environment that blends face-to-face and online approaches to instruction. A bulk of studies have explored the usefulness of Moodle in EFL contexts reporting that it enhances the language learning process (Banerjee 2011; Henderson 2010; Al-Ani 2013; Ghounane 2020; 2022).

In addition to Moodle, some social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were increasingly used by teachers to post lectures, tasks, and assignments. Today's learners consider social media an integral part of their daily lives (Gorg 2014) and they no longer favor traditional classroom-based instruction (Dudeney and Hockly 2007). Thus, incorporating these platforms into language teaching and learning attracts learners and fosters their motivation. Learners in this study showed an increased motivation for using Social Networking Sites (SNS) for their language learning preferring this method over traditional teaching methods. Moreover, learners used these platforms to create language learning communities for communication and collaboration (See details in Chapter Six). This aligns with existing literature which posits that social media provide learners with opportunities to build language learning communities, promoting communication and collaboration between teachers and learners (Gorg 2014; Deng and Tavares 2013). Thus, the use of LMSs, SNSs, and many other platforms helps teachers reach learners outside the classroom offering online options to extend classroom learning experiences and enhance interaction. Learners reported that they were able to interact with teachers and peers through online meetings, and discussion groups, providing opportunities for communication, discussion, and collaboration. On this issue, Jeong (2017) argued that Moodle provides a free space where teachers and learners can have access to the platform, thereby supporting collaboration.

Therefore, teaching methods in blended learning embraced technology and implemented different online learning platforms to support language learning, transforming the traditional learning environment into a blended one where online learning constitutes an important part. Additionally, teaching through means like Moodle encourages a student-centered environment

in which the focus of instruction is on learners rather than teachers. This finding concurs with other similar studies in EFL contexts demonstrating the effectiveness of Moodle in enhancing the language learning environment (Al-Ani 2013; Jeong 2017, Ghounane 2020; Sarnou and Sarnou 2021).

Finally, findings also revealed that incorporating online learning platforms into teaching practices promotes learners' independence and involves them in the decision-making process, particularly regarding when, how, and what materials and resources to use. Learners perceive this outside-classroom learning component as granting them more freedom and flexibility in choosing their learning paths. However, learners acknowledged that face-to-face is also an important component that provides learners with opportunities to receive guidance and check their understanding and progress. Therefore, the blend between autonomous outside-language learning and valuable face-to-face interaction with teachers makes blended learning an effective way of learning.

To sum up, teaching in the blended learning context has significantly been redirected towards a student-centered pedagogy facilitated by technology. The teaching practices promoted better language learning experiences.

8.3.2 Learners' Experiences with EFL Language Learning Activities

Transformation in teaching methods resulted in a corresponding change in language learning activities. It is worth emphasizing here that learners argued in the previous chapter that in fully face-to-face learning, teachers prepare everything, and they do not have much responsibility in choosing language learning activities (See Chapter Seven). However, one of the aspects that blended learning changed in the Algerian EFL learning culture is what learners did for language learning. There was an innovation in the use of language learning activities to include activities that promote critical thinking and enhance capacities for autonomous learning. The technology-enhanced instructional approaches used in blended learning enabled the implementation of different innovative, engaging, and interactive activities that were not feasible in traditional classroom settings.

Learners were engaged in more self-directed activities such as group work, project work, and presentations which increased learners' engagement and control over some aspects of their language learning. Additionally, they were given some responsibility. When doing project work, for example, learners can choose what (the topic), how including the structure, the content, the procedure, and use of resources, when to complete it and with whom. In this regard, Benson

(2011) argues that project work is a useful technique to involve learners in the decision-making process as they have control over the content, methods of inquiry, and outcomes. Thus, this kind of activity promotes responsibility and subsequently autonomy among learners. Furthermore, project work and research-based activities are usually completed by learners collaboratively. In this regard, Bas (2011) states that project work:

Brings opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence and to work together in a real-world environment by collaborating in tasks which they have defined for themselves, and which has not been externally imposed

(p.1).

Collaboration is indeed an important aspect of autonomous learning. Little (1991) argued that learner autonomy is the result of interdependence. Recently Murray (2014) highlighted that language is best learned interdependently and collaboratively between learners in context. The essence of collaboration in blended learning activities lies in learning the target language while simultaneously developing independence. Therefore, these kinds of activities promoted and facilitated interaction and collaboration among learners. Research on language learning and learner autonomy reveals that human interaction and collaboration are essential for language learning. Based on constructivist theory, individuals build meanings from their experiences and interactions with others (Thanasoulas 2000). Therefore, meaningful learning happens when individuals are engaged in social activities through discussion and interaction with others. In this respect, Huang et al. (2020) argue that interaction in second and foreign language acquisition is viewed as the context and process through which language can be learned. When learners collaborate and interact to accomplish activities in the blended context either online or face to face to face, they enhance not only their autonomous abilities but also their language acquisition.

From the findings, learners reported that contrary to face-to-face learning, in the blended context, language learning activities become more varied. Hence, learners can select activities they want to complete and choose groups they prefer to join and work with. This is well reported in the literature, Ghounane (2020), for example, argues that platforms like Moodle give learners the freedom to decide which activities they prefer to participate in, in what form, and to what degree the participation will take place. Additionally, to complement teachers' materials, learners independently choose other tasks and activities using different technologies such as online quizzes, forums, and videos. This not only improves their language learning but also increases ownership of their learning process. In this regard, Tseng and Walsh (2016), and

Sheninger (2016) postulate that online platforms and technologies in blended learning create authentic learning tasks with increased learners' engagement leading to greater ownership of their learning. Hence, the blended learning environment empowers learners by offering a variety of language learning activities that learners can choose from depending on their preferences, needs, and styles. Thus, in this context, the notion of choice emerges as a defining element of the Algerian learning culture significantly enhancing learner autonomy. This finding is echoed in the existing literature on blended learning, Mirriahi et al. (2015) for instance posited that blended learning gives learners choices that serve as a source of motivation and autonomy. Learners act autonomously as they engage in their own learning by choosing some aspect concerning their learning and organizing their learning paths to achieve their objectives while teachers facilitate the process as is the case in the blended context. Tucker et al (2017) maintain that learners act autonomously in the learning process when they are engaged in an activity solely for volition, pleasure, and/ or choice. Learners can engage in activities because they choose them. Furthermore, learners perceive the use of technology as an engaging element (for more details see Chapter Five).

By integrating collaborative tasks, promoting interactive activities, and allowing learners to select and choose activities based on their preferences within the blended learning environment, language learning activities are redefined in the Algerian educational context toward supporting the development of learner autonomy. To elaborate further on how activities in blended learning foster autonomy, I related them to the three main versions of autonomy namely, technical, psychological, and socio-cultural (Oxford 2003). In the context of blended learning, the technical version concerns the role of modern technologies and online platforms in conveying information and delivering content. For online activities in blended learning, the findings in his study revealed that using social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and many others enabled learners to communicate with teachers and peers anytime needed facilitating interaction as well as collaboration to complete activities. The psychological perspective focuses on learners' positive attitudes, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, desire, and willingness to carry out specific language tasks. From the findings, it is clear that learners were psychologically engaged showing increased motivation to participate in activities like group work, presentations, and research-based tasks. Finally, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes how learners develop through interaction with knowledgeable and mediating persons and become self-regulated in a particular context. The analysis in this study revealed that learners constantly collaborated with teachers and peers to complete tasks. For instance,

when engaged in group or project work, each group member can first independently think about how to discuss the topic, and then all group members can gather in a face-to-face or online meeting to expand their related knowledge and form their own ideas. They can then make decisions, determine their objectives, select strategies, and plan for ways to complete the task. Learners take control of the whole task and are responsible for their learning. Such activities make learners realize that they are responsible for the accomplishment of the activity which can contribute to the fostering of autonomy in learners (Wenden 1991; Benson 2011)

To summarize, the implementation of blended learning innovated language learning activities use in this specific research setting. By using technology-enhanced instructional approaches, learners are now engaged in self-directed activities. The variety of activities found in blended contexts ranging from group works to online quizzes and investigations, have allowed learners to take greater control over their learning process, fostering a sense of responsibility and independence. This move toward a more autonomous and interactive learning culture in the Algerian higher education context marks a significant change, echoing broader global trends in education that highlight learner-centered methodologies.

8.3.3 Learners' Experiences with EFL Language Assessment Methods

The third area which witnessed a significant change in the Algerian educational culture is assessment methods. Assessment is an important aspect of language learning and an integral component of pedagogy. It is believed to play a vital role in shaping educational experiences as well as in improving language learning. Early on, Brown et al. (1997, p. 7) argued that in order to change students' learning, assessment methods must be changed. The implementation of blended learning has introduced new assessment methods which were not feasible during full face-to-face learning, marking a significant shift in educational practices.

It is worth mentioning that learners, as expressed in Chapter Seven, showed their willingness to be assessed differently. This indicates a need for more dynamic and engaging ways to measure language learning. Blended learning meets these expectations by offering an abundance of assessment methods, ranging from group work, projects, and essays to reports and presentations. These methods provide learners with choices on how to demonstrate their understanding, catering to different learning styles and preferences (Mchone 2020). The findings revealed that learners were satisfied with the method of evaluation used in blended learning because they had many options through which they could demonstrate their understanding. Learners, for example, completed project works, conducted investigations, and delivered presentations.

Therefore, the assessment methods used in blended learning are less exam focused. In fully face-to-face learning, learners often study extensively for exams where rote memorization of materials tends to take precedence over understanding. This conventional assessment method can limit learners to think critically and apply their knowledge in real-life situations. However, in the blended context, instead of evaluating learners' capacity for retention and memorization, the assessment approaches evaluate learners' capacity for critical thinking and creativity. When asked to complete project work and investigations, for example, learners need to use high-order skills such as reflection, criticality, and creativity. Given (2002) argued that learners become independent thinkers when they are asked high-level questions and engage in meaningful conversations. Additionally, Nicol (2009a) further elaborated that employing such assessment methods in the blended context should "engage students in deep rather than surface learning" and "promote students' productive engagement in learning" (p. 5). Thus, the testing culture in blended learning measured language learners' ability to synthesize, collaborate, solve problems, and manage projects. This holistic approach to assessment promotes in learners skills that are needed for success in the 21st century.

Technology, as an integral part of blended learning, is an enabler that provides teachers with various online tools that they can choose from to assess language learners' progress. These online assessment tools provide teachers with data about learners' progress as well as needs fostering a culture of evaluative judgements. Furthermore, the findings revealed that learners completed some online quizzes to test different language learning aspects. The incorporation of such online assessment methods helps both teachers and learners keep track of progress providing continuous evaluation of student language learning. Additionally, it allows learners to receive feedback immediately and autonomously, enabling them to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Moreover, the use of technology in assessments facilitates collaborative learning because online platforms allow learners to work together on a project and share information and knowledge with peers, encouraging collaborative learning (see details in the previous section).

It is worth noting here, that these assessment methods like project work, presentations, and investigations were part of the theoretical assessment framework before COVID-19. However, teachers in face-to-face settings generally relied on written tests as the primary assessment method, especially for summative assessments. I highlighted in my analysis that it is particularly summative assessment that has been reshaped in the blended learning context. Additionally, I mentioned in section 1.2.2 of the general introduction that one of the key

aspects of the educational reform that took place in Algeria (LMD) was to emphasize ongoing assessment using such instruments to promote a student-centered approach. However, again this focus on diverse assessment methods existed mostly in theory. Although some teachers did incorporate some of these methods, their use remained limited. So, my aim in discussing this particular aspect of language learning pedagogy, is to encourage these practices by shedding light on the benefits of these diverse assessment methods and illustrating how well learners engage with them. My data provides insights demonstrating that blended learning during COVID-19 brought new opportunities for implementing these alternative methods more effectively.

To conclude, the implementation of blended learning in the Algerian higher education context has significantly altered assessment approaches in EFL learning. The evaluation practices within this context now focus more on collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills than retention of information. Learners no longer cram for exams but collaborate, synthesize, manage projects, and apply knowledge. The newly adopted assessment methods align with learners' expectations for more diverse evaluation methods, giving them opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in different ways. This shift in assessment approaches, as observed in this study, changed the assessment culture within the Algerian educational environment, where the adopted approaches contribute to a more holistic language learning experience by equipping learners with skills that extend beyond traditional written tests, aligning with the objectives of the LMD educational of reform.

8.3.4 Resource-Rich Environment: EFL Language Learning Materials

It is worth noting here that following the definition provided by Guerrettaz et al. (2022), the term “materials” in this study encompasses both traditional materials and web resources used in the blended context. According to Guerrettaz et al. (2022), materials refer to all the resources that students and teachers engage with in their language learning and teaching endeavors. This includes but is not limited to, books and teacher handouts as well as digital artifacts such as videos, audio recordings, PDFs, eBooks, online articles, educational platforms, discussion forums, quizzes, and so on. While some distinctions might exist between materials and general resources, this study treats them collectively to capture the various types of content and tools integrated into the blended learning environment, recognizing their shared role in supporting EFL learning.

Contrary to face-to-face learning where the use of physical materials such as handouts and boards was mostly dominant, learners perceived material use in blended learning as being

varied. The analysis indeed revealed that blended learning innovates the learning environment by introducing a more flexible and diverse approach to the incorporation of learning materials that range from physical materials to digital books, multimedia presentations, videos, online quizzes, and websites. Indeed, this varied approach appears to motivate learners effectively. This is in agreement with Yusoff et al. (2017) argument that the diverse materials used in blended learning can be a motivating factor for learners.

The findings indicate that one of the strengths of using blended learning approaches in EFL teaching and learning is the ability to integrate external materials such as web resources alongside lecture materials, thereby enriching learners' language learning experiences. Findings in the previous sections revealed that in the Algerian context, educators implementing blended learning used Moodle and social media as learning management systems. These online platforms are believed to enhance the blended learning experience by providing access to a wide range of resources and engaging learners in motivating activities that positively affect language learning outcomes. Bouguebs (2019) maintained that Moodle engages learners through

Highly motivating activities that positively affect students' performance and promote their progress because they can work not only with course materials but also access any web resource"

(p. 1).

The implementation of blended learning has significantly impacted material use for language learning in the Algerian educational context. The availability and variety of materials, in this context along with learners' interactions with them, are of particular interest in this study. However, I limit myself in this section to discuss solely how blended learning enriched the learning environment and diversified resources to keep the word account limit of this study. A detailed and extensive exploration of resource use and learner interaction with the available materials within the EFL blended learning context is elaborated in chapter six, section 6.2.1.1 delving into some practical aspects such as the type of material used, and ways learners interacted with these materials concerning language learning and autonomy development.

To conclude, the shift towards a more resource-rich learning environment as blended learning has significantly reshaped the Algerian learning culture impacting educational practices for both teachers and learners as well as altering their roles, attitudes, and behaviors. These changes hold significant potential for improving the language learning process and promoting greater autonomy among learners.

8.4 Summary of Change

Based on all the above findings, the blended learning approach has notably impacted various components of EFL teaching and learning experience within the EFL Algerian higher educational context. Hence, I will summarize in the visual below the key elements that define the Algerian EFL educational culture within this specific context of blended learning. Although this visual does not encompass every aspect of the change discussed throughout the chapter, it offers a clear and concise representation of the main changes.

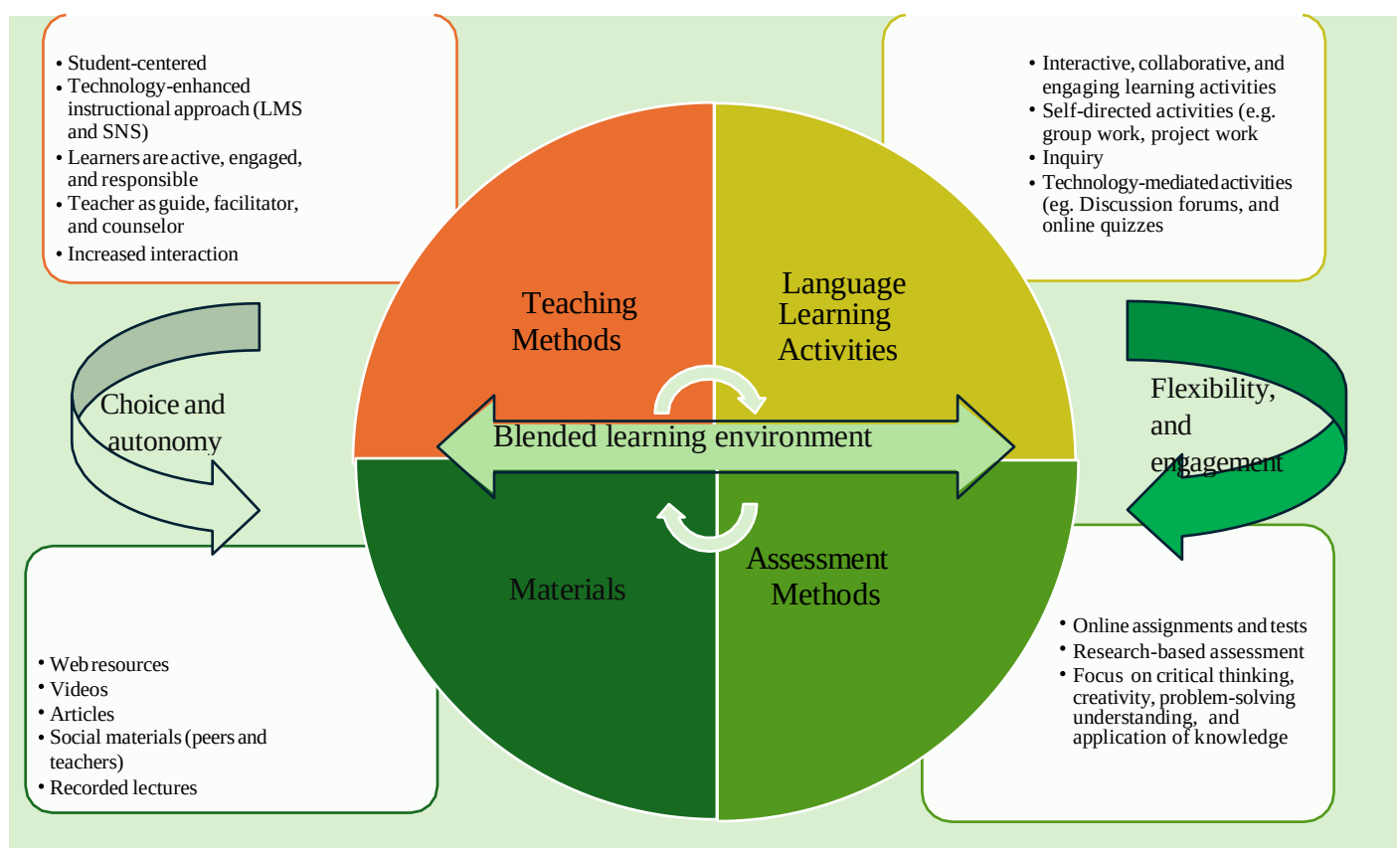


Figure 14: Enhancing EFL Algerian Learning Culture through Blended Learning: A Summary of Change

As seen in the above figure, the implementation of blended learning in the Algerian EFL context has brought a noticeable change in four main pedagogical elements namely, teaching methods, language learning activities, assessment methods, and the allocation of materials. These interdependent elements constitute a learning system in which change in one element affects

the others, collectively shaping the EFL learning experiences. This shift, as revealed across chapters five to eight, reflects a clear movement from traditional teacher-led methods to more learner-centered practices that actively support the development of learner autonomy. Findings from chapter seven revealed that teaching methods had been predominantly teacher-centered in full face-to-face learning. However, they began to incorporate student-centered features in the blended context. In chapter five, on the one hand, learners expressed evolving perceptions of their roles, acknowledging a more active participatory engagement in the blended setting. On the one hand, teachers began to adopt more facilitative roles. Teachers integrated different online learning systems that enhanced the language learning environment. Delivering lectures using these learning management systems encouraged learners to engage with the content at their own pace, an important step toward promoting independent learning. Therefore, teaching methods in the blended learning experience gave learners the flexibility to study anytime and from anywhere, making learning more accessible and continuous. As noted by Ju and Mei (2018), this type of flexibility supports lifelong learning, a point echoed by the participants in this study who enjoyed extending their language learning beyond classroom boundaries and planning their own learning paths. This aligns well with Rahim's (2019) argument that 21st-century EFL education demands flexible and student-centered models and with Albiladi and Alshareef's (2019) description of blended learning as a revolution in language learning.

Furthermore, teachers introduced structured yet flexible learning tasks, online resources, and digital platforms and tools that supported self-directed activities that learners in chapters five and six identified as instrumental in helping them take charge of their learning. These activities promoted collaboration, reflection, and progress tracking, thereby reinforcing learners' autonomy. These practices reflect wider trends observed in other EFL contexts, where blended learning has been shown to promote collaborative learning, learner engagement, and autonomy (Adas and Bakir, 2013; Shih, 2010; Marsh, 2012). Additionally, teachers adopted different assessment methods. As reported in the previous sections, learners were allowed to choose how to demonstrate their understanding and the assessment was based on criteria such as critical thinking and problem-solving rather than rote memorization, fostering learners' lifelong skills. Besides, the use of online quizzes, interactive platforms, and performance-based assessments not only enhanced language skills but also boosted learner motivation. Motivation was emphasized in chapter six section 6.3.3, highlighting how these practices motivated learners and engaged them actively with their learning. This aligns with Albiladi and Alshareef's (2019) statement that these types of activities increase learner motivation. The findings also revealed

that Algerian EFL teachers who relied heavily on traditional materials such as printed handouts, began to introduce technology-enhanced tools. The way learners interacted with these resources as discussed in chapter six makes it clear that the allocation of different learning resources enabled learners to navigate their language learning experiences individually and collaboratively, enhancing flexible and independent learning. In sum, the blended learning model redefined the language learning culture and expanded the boundaries of the learning environment, creating more meaningful and autonomous learning experiences

The language learning process and autonomy development are bound to the different practices within a learning context; therefore, this study highlights that changes in the explored elements promote a more flexible and engaging learning environment and have the potential to empower learners with greater control over their learning process, thereby fostering autonomy. The findings presented herein lay a solid foundation for further exploration of the Algerian learning culture in a blended context and the dynamics between the technology-based approaches to language education and learner autonomy.

In a nutshell, if the change were scrutinized, one could see that the new practices affect learners' roles, responsibilities, freedom, choice, and involvement in the learning process. This can indeed signal the potential of blended learning in enhancing the language learning process and subsequently autonomy.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been dedicated to presenting and interpreting learners' perceptions about some of the educational practices in a blended context. In particular, efforts were made to elicit learners' views about the changes introduced to their EFL learning process through the implementation of blended learning, with a special focus on autonomy development.

The findings in this chapter highlighted the different impacts of blended learning on the language-learning culture in Algerian higher education. Notably, blended learning promoted a shift toward a student-centered approach to language learning by integrating technology into pedagogical practices. Online platforms redirected traditional teaching methods, making them more interactive and engaging for learners.

Furthermore, the implementation of blended learning led to a diversification of language learning activities, assessment methods, and instructional materials. This diversification has created a more flexible learning environment wherein individual learning styles, needs, and

preferences were accommodated.

One significant conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that blended learning emerges as a promising approach for promoting an effective language learning process and giving learners room to take control of their learning.

Chapter Nine: Concluding Insights and Future Directions

9.1 Introduction

After having presented the analysis and discussion of the research findings in the previous chapters, in this concluding chapter, I will synthesize key findings from the research, draw conclusions and present broader implications for different stakeholders. It is crucial to highlight at the outset of this chapter that the conclusions I have drawn herein are based on my understanding of the topic being investigated, the literature reviewed on learner autonomy, my contextual grounding (Morrow 2005), and experience, acknowledging that they remain open for various interpretations that may emerge with further research. This chapter also identifies areas where further investigation is needed and provides recommendations for future research. Additionally, I will discuss some specific research limitations and reflect on the research design and findings. Finally, I will end this chapter with personal reflections on this PhD journey, highlighting how it has shaped my development as a researcher and as a person.

9.2 Main Conclusions and Broader Implications

The findings which were analyzed and interpreted in the previous chapters offer valuable insights that contribute to the broader understanding of how learner autonomy is perceived and fostered in non-western educational contexts, particularly in the Algerian EFL context. The conclusions of the current study not only highlight key implications for stakeholders at different levels but also offer new perspectives on the different elements that shape autonomy in this context. These conclusions along with their potential implications will be discussed under three main categories, namely theoretical, contextual pedagogical, and methodological.

9.2.1 Theoretical Conclusions and Implications

Since learner autonomy is a much-debated concept, the first main conclusion of this research study concerns the nature of the concept of autonomy. This study found that learner autonomy is a complex, multi-dimensional, universal, and context-sensitive construct that is influenced by many factors. Such a conclusion accentuates the continued debate found in the literature (Little 1991; Oxford 2003; Benson 2011; Reinders 2011; Murray 2014, Teng 2019). It is complex because exploring autonomy in learners is not straightforward; it requires an in-depth investigation of different aspects. This is reflected in the design of this research study which considered many factors to unveil autonomy in learners. To delve deep into different aspects

of learner autonomy and provide a clear understanding, this study adopted the ecological metaphor put forward by Palfreyman (2014) and explored Benson's (2011) framework regarding the different dimensions of control. By adopting an ecological perspective, this research accommodated a holistic account, investigating learners within the learning context rather than in isolation. This means that the present study considered the influence of the whole learning context and learners' perceptions of that context. For the dimensions of control, this study focused mainly on whether learners were able to control their learning management, their learning content, and their cognitive processing (Benson 2011).

Moreover, autonomy is multi-dimensional because it is influenced by both individual and contextual factors. The findings of the current research highlight the social and cultural dimensions of learner autonomy, recognizing them as inevitable and important ingredients while attempting to understand the concept. As such learner autonomy is perceived and practiced in relation to specific contexts (Benson 2011; Littlewood 1999; Palfreyman and Smith 2003; Sinclair 2000; Palfreyman 2014; Teng 2019). It is practiced in social contexts requiring interdependence (Little 1991) and collaboration (Murray 2014). Furthermore, autonomous behaviors may vary across sociocultural environments, but autonomy remains a universal concept and human right (Little 1999). The findings that emerged in this study further support these arguments, arguing that autonomy is an innate capacity, a natural attribute (Little 1991) applicable even to non-western contexts. Therefore, autonomy is relevant and appropriate in different learning contexts including the one investigated in this research.

Learner autonomy is also context-sensitive because the findings revealed that learners in the specific context of Algeria have a good understanding of learner autonomy and autonomous learning. However, their ability to practice their autonomous behaviors is strongly shaped by elements such as teaching methods, teacher roles, activities they are engaged in, materials, and the overall educational culture. Most importantly, learners demonstrate a willingness to learn autonomously making learner autonomy a desirable goal among EFL language learners. From this perspective, learner autonomy can be interpreted as an ongoing interaction between the individual capacity of learners to control their learning and the opportunities provided by the learning context to exercise this capacity. This study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of the concept of learner autonomy by concluding that learner autonomy is a capacity that develops or diminishes in response to contextual affordances and constraints.

These conclusions have significant implications for policymakers, emphasizing that autonomy is a feasible and achievable goal therefore concrete actions are needed to explicitly include learner autonomy in educational reforms and planning. This objective, which has not yet been fully achieved, was already the focus of the educational reform implemented in 2004/2005. Since its implementation, the LMD system aimed to shift from a classical educational approach to a more learner-centered approach that encourages autonomous learning. However, to achieve the objective set out in this reform, explicit initiatives that integrate learner autonomy as a core component of the educational reform are required. That is; to make autonomy a feasible and attainable goal, the findings of the present study suggest two main areas of improvement. First, putting theory into practice requires policymakers to revisit the existing LMD framework and incorporate mechanisms that promote autonomous learning behaviors. This could involve creating teachers' training programs to promote autonomy-supportive practices, adopting modern technologies and innovative teaching approaches such as blended learning as proposed in the study in hands, revisiting the curriculum to include more flexible and varied learning approaches, and diversifying activities, assessment methods to prioritize learners and their continuous progress. Second, this study offered fresh insights into how learners interact autonomously with resources in the learning environment, therefore, policy should also address the allocation of adequate human and material resources, which has been identified as a challenge during the LMD transition (Idri 2012). Therefore, as a concrete action plan, the process could start by assigning a committee within the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to assess how current LMD practices align with autonomy goals. This committee would draft recommendations for integrating autonomy into practices as well proposing strategies for implementation including pilot programs and professional developments for educators. Once policy revisions are drafted, different stakeholders should carry out a review process to ensure that the new guidelines are relevant and feasible in the local context.

The findings of this study indicate that promoting learner autonomy is not just an abstract goal but a practical step in advancing the LMD system's reform agenda as well as making the LMD a success in the Algerian local context. This approach provides a clear pathway for enhancing the Algerian higher education environment's capacity to produce independent and autonomous language learners.

9.2.2 Contextual and Pedagogical Conclusions and Implications

On the one hand, the Algerian culture of learning at the tertiary level in fully face-to-face learning is perceived by learners as discouraging their autonomy. Despite reforms in higher education advocating autonomy, the language learning process remains teacher-centered and follows a transmission-based approach. Teachers play important roles in transmitting knowledge to learners while learners are still passive recipients of that knowledge, hindering their ability to learn autonomously. Moreover, the predetermined and rigid curriculum is also among the inherent constraints which the Algerian language educational environment still struggles with. Language learning practices including activities, materials, and classroom discussions are oriented by teachers' syllabi, offering learners no opportunities to choose or manage any aspect of their learning. Besides, independent learning is discouraged due to the lack of resources, limiting learners' opportunities for language learning beyond the classroom. Additionally, assessment methods, predominantly table and exam-based, still heavily influence both learning and teaching processes, as both teachers and learners prioritize exam requirements over understanding. Such testing culture tends to measure learners' retention ability rather than critical thinking, encouraging the student to adopt easy and superficial approaches to learning by simply memorizing content. Learners also reported that some teachers do not favor independent learning and are hesitant to abandon their authoritative role. Therefore, they are reluctant to share responsibility for learning with their learners. As such the overall higher education culture may not be autonomy-supportive. Accordingly, depending on learners' perceptions of changes, teachers should create learning environments that allow learners to exercise some control over some aspects of their learning. Furthermore, teachers should appropriately interpret the notion of autonomy, recognize learners as important agents in learning, and avoid stifling their capacities for autonomous learning. Furthermore, one sociocultural aspect – the misinterpretation of the notion of respect- is found to affect autonomous learning in the Algerian culture of learning. While respect is an important educational and social norm, it can sometimes impede the fostering of autonomy in the context of discussing important things related to learning such as learners' needs, preferences, and opinions. Such a view may affect effective learner-teacher interaction and promote poor discussions because learners may hesitate to face teachers and avoid correcting mistakes and questioning the learning content. Therefore, if the misunderstanding of respect becomes a barrier to effective language learning and the development of learner autonomy, teachers in their roles of facilitators and language counsellors should clarify the concept of respect. Teachers should explain that respect can still be maintained when suggesting, questioning, or

discussing teachers' decisions about the learning process. Instead, such interactions can enhance learning. Teachers should encourage learners to take the initiative to correct mistakes, debate, and criticize different learning aspects. Fostering a culture of open discussion promotes not only learner autonomy but also critical thinking. The aim here is not to diminish the value of respecting knowledgeable individuals but to correct misconceptions and understandings of respect in the context under study. Learners can still address teachers formally and respectfully while actively engaging in their language learning process. Besides, the findings in this study revealed that teachers are hesitant to abandon their authoritative roles, therefore, they should recognize that involving learners in the decision-making process will not affect their important roles. Instead, it fosters a culture where responsibility is shared, and courtesy is valued. That is to say that respecting teachers and embracing autonomy can coexist when both teachers and learners understand that autonomy does not disregard teachers' authority but rather emphasizes learners' active roles in their language-learning process. Rather than conflicting learner autonomy with cultural values like respect, autonomy can take place through a collaborative and respectful relationship between teachers and learners. These inherent issues in the Algerian educational learning environment are pointed out by learners themselves, demanding immediate attention and consideration from education authorities, as they bear significant implications for the characteristics of language education in Algeria, especially at the tertiary level as well as for the quality and nature of the overall EFL learning context.

Therefore, this study depicts a crucial, yet often ignored, representation of the quality of the English language education system in Algeria and the learning environment as a whole. It shows that higher education practices do not support independence and autonomy, and the context in which language learning occurs falls short of promoting autonomous principles. Learners perceive their learning environment as hindering the development of their autonomous abilities, encouraging dependency, and discouraging lifelong learning which is important to help learners cope with the constantly developing world and take part in the overall growth of the country. The possible reason behind such perceptions can be related to the education system in Algeria which lacks the needed practices, tools, and initiatives, especially from teachers to support and assist learners in becoming autonomous. Predominant practices tend to suppress rather than encourage learner autonomy.

Another important conclusion drawn from the findings of this study concerns the gap found between learners' expectations and their actual experiences while learning English in the Algerian EFL context. Learners desire to have a say in their learning process and advocate for

varying degrees and versions of autonomy. They seek a learning environment that allows them greater roles and responsibilities for their learning. However, for these practices to be promoted, learners suggest that they should be given opportunities to control at least some aspects of their learning, with teachers adopting different roles in this new approach while still maintaining their importance. Teachers' roles are indeed crucial to hand control over learning to learners. Nonetheless, learners were not satisfied with the current practices in their learning environment as they felt excluded from the decision-making process.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a discrepancy between educational policies and the actual learning experiences. Policy documents and educational reforms advocate for autonomy and responsibility in language learning but these principles remain theoretical. In practice, teachers do not apply the guidelines from these policies and reforms. Consequently, most learners find themselves in a teacher-centered environment that discourages their autonomy. This disparity has indeed significant implications for learners' motivation, hindering effective language learning. Thorough investigations at both local and national levels should be carried out to explore why the language learning context in Algeria, particularly educational practices such as teaching methods, fails to attain the objectives set by higher education policies. These investigations should prioritize narrative approaches, such as narratives, language learning stories, and interviews, to capture the lived experiences of both teachers and learners and provide in-depth insights into the contextual factors impacting educational outcomes.

These findings have direct implications for educational authorities, including policymakers, stakeholders, curriculum planners, and teachers. Curriculum and teaching practices need to genuinely encourage learning and learner-centeredness, reflecting these practices in reality rather than merely in policy. The investigation of learners' language learning experiences and their capacities to learn autonomously in different learning environments should be a priority for enhancing the quality of the language learning context in Algeria. This investigation helps determine factors inhibiting or encouraging autonomy in learners and whether learners can embrace autonomous learning effectively if given the chance to. Learning contexts where autonomy is not encouraged and learners are seen as passive and lacking readiness to be involved in autonomous learning, should receive support. This support could involve promoting an autonomy-supportive environment, adapting some educational practices, involving learners in the decision-making process, and giving them room to exercise some control over their learning, ultimately producing engaged, responsible, and autonomous language learners.

On the other hand, learners in this study perceive the processes of learning and teaching the English language in a blended context at the Northern University as distinct from fully face- to-face learning. The implementation of blended learning in the context under study has enhanced the language learning environment and impacted positively the language learning situation and the promotion of autonomy. Although blended learning is newly adopted within the Algerian educational context, learners perceive it to promote their engagement and create an effective language learning environment. Therefore, the language learning culture at the university has known different changes at different levels. Learners' roles have transitioned from being passive recipients of teachers' knowledge to becoming active agents, taking responsibility for their learning. They now control different aspects of their learning management and cognitive processing. While learners are no longer 'spoon-fed', as evidenced in the data, teachers' roles were minimized and have shifted to guides, feedback providers, and counsellors. Furthermore, teaching methods have become more learner-centered, incorporating technology and online platforms to deliver content, increasing learners' motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration. These changes were reflected in the way students interacted with the materials and each other, as they reported more frequent use of digital resources and online collaboration. Moreover, blended learning provides a rich language learning environment with various resources, offering opportunities for beyond classroom learning. In addition, according to participants, this has encouraged them to engage in self- directed activities such as group work, project work, and investigations, enhancing engagement, responsibility, collaboration, and thereby autonomy. Assessment methods have also evolved from traditional exams which tend to measure memorization to focus on understanding, critical thinking, and creativity encouraging learners to take a more active role and responsibility for their learning.

Furthermore, learners in a blended context are aware of, strategically engage, and purposefully interact with the available resources, opportunities, and affordances in their learning context to learn language effectively and autonomously. Besides, learners are capable of employing language learning strategies and skills to enhance their language learning, provided they see the need for so doing. This indicates that learners' actions are informed, strategic, volitional, and non-determined. This approach is particularly evident in the online portion of blended learning where learners were found to create their own interdependent language learning communities that promote collaboration and autonomous learning. This highlights the

significant role learners play in their own learning. As such, they should adopt this proactive approach in all learning situations irrespective of teachers or others discarding them from decision-making such as in fully face-to-face learning. By accessing other materials, and resources and participating in extra language learning activities with friends or peers, learners can collaboratively enhance their learning. They should work independently and purposefully interact with the available opportunities in their learning context to develop their language learning process, their autonomous abilities, and themselves as language learners.

Therefore, one important conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that blended learning as an approach to language education is appealing and of interest to Algerian EFL learners. The incorporation of various approaches to learning in blended context such as traditional face-to-face and online learning addresses learners' needs, extends language learning beyond the confines of traditional classrooms, develops critical thinking, enhances interaction, collaboration, and motivation, and thereby fosters autonomous, independent, and self-directed learning. While flexibility and accessibility found in the blended experience worked well for learners as they were allowed to learn the language remotely without being physically present at the institution, they clearly expressed the importance of face-to-face interactions and physical support of teachers. This study confirms that learners value out-of-class learning as an important component of blended learning but still require some degree of physical interaction which is indeed very important for their learning. This makes blended learning an ideal approach, combining both methods and giving teachers and learners the flexibility to decide the balance between face-to-face and online learning based on their needs and preferences. This balance is indeed an essential area for decision-making between learners and teachers. Moreover, the components of blended learning mainly technological components are perceived by learners as allowing them space to learn language effectively, autonomously, and independently, while still having the opportunity for teachers' and peer's guidance. Furthermore, learners' proactive mindset, self-awareness, and motivation to use technology in a blended learning context engage them emotionally and empower them as autonomous and motivated learners who are eager to embrace innovative learning experiences regardless of any constraints.

Therefore, these conclusions imply that giving learners opportunities to take responsibility for and control some aspects of their language learning process can be considered as a promising

approach to promote learners' engagement, motivation, thereby autonomy. While learners in this study, do acknowledge the big shift in language education when studying in a blended context, they report that these practices are not experienced in face-to-face learning environments. The implication of this is that blended learning can be suggested as an effective model for EFL language education, aiming to foster an autonomous supportive environment. This study thus urges education authorities in Algeria to take the necessary steps and consider incorporating such models in their practices making it a permanent approach.

Investigating learners' autonomy in two different learning contexts helps depict another image of learners in the context under investigation. In a traditional face-to-face setting, when learners face some constraining forces, they typically choose to adopt passive behaviors. However, in a blended learning environment where they are given room to exercise their autonomous behaviors, learners demonstrate their capacity to learn autonomously. The findings from this study present a new and realistic profile of language learners in the Algerian EFL context, distinct from the one offered by previous studies. These findings emphasize how learners' perceptions and autonomous capacities have been stifled by the educational practices in fully face-to-face learning and how these capacities become evident when the learning situation changes such as with the implementation of blended learning. This indicates that learners' abilities are often underestimated by teachers, education authorities, and the existing EFL literature in Algeria. Contrary to the common belief that learners lack the readiness and skills to learn autonomously, findings from this study indicate that learners do in fact show greater awareness of their needs, and the requirements of their language learning process and can control different aspects of their learning as well as address challenges to improve their learning. These findings have significant implications for further research on self-awareness in language learning, investigating how learners assess and address their own learning needs, as well as the role of such awareness in developing autonomous behaviors. Such research would illuminate the understanding of autonomy in the Algerian EFL context and support initiatives that encourage students to take a more active role in their language learning process.

In short, the capacities for autonomous learning among learners in this context call for a careful and critical re-evaluation based on the insights provided by this study. The learners' perceptions I investigated in the present study show that learners are generally ready to take responsibility and control their own learning when the context allows them to do so, and that blended learning offers this opportunity. In a blended learning environment, learners effectively and appropriately demonstrate their autonomous abilities. Therefore, changing the educational

culture can lead to changes in learners' behaviors and approaches to learning. These conclusions thus open new avenues for future research in this area and have significant implications for research on learners' autonomy, highlighting essential components such as metacognitive awareness, learners' interaction with their learning environment, online collaboration, the influence of the learning context and many other areas of learner autonomy which remain overlooked in the EFL context of Algeria. These research findings, therefore, highlight the pivotal and critical role the learning context plays in either encouraging or suppressing learners' autonomous abilities, behaviors, and practices. This conclusion supports those of other studies in the field (Smith 2003, Palfreyman 2014).

Finally, while learners expressed a genuine desire for more blended experiences in their context, they also pointed out some obstacles that need to be addressed namely technical and technological challenges. For blended learning to be successfully implemented an induction phase is essential, as it is a new learning environment for learners. Not all learners have access to the necessary computing devices and internet connection required for the online component of blended learning. Additionally, internet access is limited in Algeria with some remote regions lacking coverage. These findings have important implications for different stakeholders in Algeria as an effective blended learning approach relies on adequate technology. Without addressing these challenges, the potential benefit of blended may be limited and the blended learning approach could be negatively impacted.

However, while technology has undoubtedly enhanced the language learning process and environment for Algerian EFL learners, it should not be only the focus of research and education authorities. The findings from this study indicate that it is the blended structure itself- combining both online and face-to-face components- that most effectively fosters learner autonomy. Learners' perceptions highlight that blended learning supports the development of autonomy-related skills such as self-direction, self-regulation, self-management, and many other aspects by providing a flexible environment that encourages active engagement, with technology playing a pivotal role. Besides, the focus of this study is on how blended learning reshaped various pedagogical elements, including teaching methods, language learning activities, assessment strategies, and material use, and on learners' experiences within this context from the viewpoint of learners. This leaves a gap for further research into course design in the blended context that could enhance autonomy even more effectively. Given that course design and pedagogy have much more influence on learners' experiences than the format alone, there remains a crucial need for further research that focuses on course design within blended

learning in the context under investigation. Future studies should investigate how specific pedagogical approaches can be crafted to maximize the autonomy-supportive potential of blended learning. Therefore, policymakers, educators, and researchers must develop further knowledge on how to successfully integrate technology into EFL learning to promote autonomy in the Algerian EFL setting.

As a general conclusion, the current study indicates that in an effective and successful language learning process autonomy is a vital ingredient. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the capacity for autonomy pre-exists and is inherent in Algerian learners. Indeed, learners in the context under investigation are ready to embrace autonomous learning and do in fact exercise their autonomous behaviors when allowed and given the opportunity to do so, as is evident in the blended context. Therefore, for educational practices to prove effective and foster a culture of autonomous learning, blended learning can be considered an ideal learning approach because the blend between face-to-face and online learning offers a balance between autonomy and guidance.

9.2.3 Methodological Conclusions and Implications

This study also offers methodological conclusions and implications for researching learner autonomy in language learning. The qualitative approach used in this research enabled the collection of rich, in-depth, and first-hand data on learners' EFL learning experiences in two different learning contexts, namely blended and fully face-to-face learning. The rich narrative data generated through narrative frames and semi-structured interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding learner autonomy and captured the individual stories of participants, revealing how their unique contexts shaped their autonomous behaviors. Moreover, the qualitative data analysis framework adopted in this study namely, semantic and latent thematic analysis, enabled me to effectively capture the nuances of learners' stories. Such richness of data stands in contrast to quantitative methods, which if used, might have yielded superficial findings. Therefore, given the complex nature of learner autonomy, research methodologies must be valid to ensure trustworthy results. Additionally, since autonomy can have varied interpretations and meanings across different people and contexts (Benson 2007, Sinclair 2000), it is useful to investigate it through the lens of learners within their context, as they are the ones directly concerned. Thus, investigating learner autonomy in the specific context of Algeria using the qualitative methodology from research design to data collection and analysis and from the viewpoint of learners has proven effective in obtaining valuable data thereby important findings about the context under study. Thus, qualitative

methodologies have the potential to deeply explore multidimensional and complex constructs like language learning and autonomy and are effective in generating rich, informative, and valid findings. This indeed has important implications for future research in this specific context because learner autonomy remains an overlooked area. Future research can build on this narrative framework to investigate autonomy-related aspects.

9.3 Limitations of the Study

Any research is prone to some limitations, and this study is no exception. Despite my efforts to present a detailed, rich, and context-specific study, this work bears some limitations. In section 9.4, I discussed the limitations specific to the research design, this section, however, addresses the broader limitations of the study.

First of all, since research is inherently context-specific and should be understood within its particular context (Lamb 2005) and “beliefs are always contextualized in relation to some learning task or situation” (Benson and Lor 1999, p.462), learners’ beliefs, perceptions, and views may change over time depending on learning tasks or learning contexts. Therefore, the interpretation of the results and conclusions I presented in this research are limited to the specific context where this study took place. Consequently, similar research conducted in another context, or in the future in the same context might produce different findings.

Perhaps another limitation of this study concerns the student sample. Indeed, Masters’ learners were purposefully selected because I assumed they possess advanced and rich experiences with the Algerian higher education system providing valuable data on learner autonomy. However, data from masters’ students may better reflect autonomous learning behaviors and a deeper understanding of the concept compared to undergraduates who have less experience with higher education teaching methods and the overall system. This may jeopardize the generalizability of the study findings to other courses and educational stages. Furthermore, undergraduate and postgraduate levels are two different educational stages. Evidently, differences in variables between these stages could potentially yield different data than what was obtained from master’s students.

Another limitation concerns the nature and quality of the narrative data gathered through narrative frames. I was aware that while reflecting on their blended language learning experiences, learners might not have provided their real experiences but rather their “crafted reconstructions” (Leppänen and Kalaja, 2002, cited in Mercer 2013, p. 162) of these

experiences. It is possible that learners made alterations to their true narratives during this reconstruction process. However, this does not impact the validity of the generated data, or the findings and conclusions drawn herein. This study aimed to capture learners' understandings and interpretations of their experience, which means their subjective reality, so any alterations can be considered as insights into learners' underlying schemas and beliefs (Mercer 2013, p. 165).

9.4 Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research

9.4.1 Recommendations

The current study's findings highlight several key points, leading to several research recommendations that need to be taken into consideration for a better improvement in language education and autonomous learning in the context being studied. They revolve around three overarching themes: the need for student-centered learning and engagement, teacher training and education for autonomy development, and the required systematic support and integration of blended learning.

9.4.1.1 Recommendations for Student-Centered Learning and Engagement

The findings of this study highlighted learners' high level of awareness in expressing their language learning-related issues. This includes among many others their dissatisfaction with the current educational practices and their feeling of exclusion from the decision-making process. A practical recommendation would be to establish a system that allows to regularly evaluate and provide feedback on their learning experiences. Thus, stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and teachers should engage in a dialogue with learners about their learning experiences to better understand their expectations and preferences. A mechanism like this could be managed by the department of English language at universities or a designated language teaching and learning center and can be achieved through different platforms and formats. Education authorities could host online webinars where learners can share their experiences and discuss their preferences in terms of activities, assessment methods, and effective classroom interaction, particularly in the context of autonomy. Additionally, focus group discussions can provide additional opportunities for an open dialogue, allowing learners to voice their perspectives on various current educational practices. In addition, distributing surveys and questionnaires at the beginning and end of each semester can help gather relevant data on learners' expectations and feedback. Formal ongoing feedback channels, whether physical, such as suggestion boxes, or digital, through dedicated online platforms, can also be

used to allow learners to continuously submit their feedback. Such approaches foster an atmosphere of sharing ideas and recommendations and create constructive feedback, informing both policy and practice. This also helps ensure that language education is based on learners' needs and effectively supports learner autonomy.

Furthermore, EFL learners at Algerian universities should be provided with structured opportunities to actively engage and participate in their learning experiences, fostering a sense of responsibility for their language learning. One recommendation is to incorporate teaching approaches that are learner-centered. This can be achieved specifically by diversifying their instructional models to address the varied abilities, preferences, and needs of learners and implementing more collaborative projects, peer-teaching activities, and problem-solving tasks which can encourage learners to participate meaningfully in their language learning process. Besides, engaging students in some sort of reflective practice such as learning journals and self-assessment tasks can encourage them to monitor and take responsibility for their progress. Furthermore, any decisions concerning the language learning process should be negotiated with learners to better align content with their needs and goals. This can be done through conducting needs analyses at the beginning of each semester to set relevant learning objectives. Such practices place learners at the center of the language learning process and promote active engagement, ensuring that the curriculum is tailored to support their development and autonomy.

Learners should also be given opportunities to choose how they demonstrate their understanding. Not all learners are satisfied with on-table and exam-based assessments; alternative methods such as presentations, project works, investigations, reports, and essays can be used. The focus of evaluation and testing procedures should not be on memorization but rather on understanding and critical thinking. Therefore, curriculum, teaching methods, assessment methods, and overall educational practices at tertiary level should promote critical thinking, as learners value understanding more than memorization. Moreover, more meaningful resources need to be provided for learners. This can be through creating structured environments where learners receive individualized guidance, self-access different resources, and attend workshops on different aspects such as raising self-awareness, self-assessment skills and so forth. These environments may include language support centers or language learning hubs.

9.4.1.2 Recommendations for Teacher Education for Autonomy

Given that teachers may act as a potential constraint to promoting autonomy in the context under investigation, it is essential that they engage in professional development which would provide both theoretical knowledge and practical experience in learner autonomy-supportive strategies. This continuing professional development (CPD) can be delivered through workshops and seminars presented by qualified professionals in the learner autonomy domain. Themes such as training teachers to promote a learning environment where learners have a voice, developing strategies to foster a culture of shared responsibility between teachers and learners, and training teachers to adopt counselling techniques that promote responsibility in learners can be considered. CPD can also cover methods for encouraging collaborative learning strategies and peer-learning activities. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of learners' interaction with the available resources in their learning environment, CPD can focus on the roles of teachers in raising learners' awareness of the resources available to them, which can help their learning. Such CPD programs are strongly recommended across higher education institutions in Algeria to equip teachers with the necessary expertise to adopt practices that align well with autonomous principles. Furthermore, raising teachers' awareness of the importance of autonomy in language education can encourage a shift from an authoritative role toward a more collaborative, responsibility-sharing approach with learners.

Moreover, creating opportunities for students to take greater roles and responsibilities in their learning is essential for fostering autonomy in the Algerian EFL context. However, to achieve this, both policies and educational practices must acknowledge this as a significant educational goal. Therefore, education authorities at the tertiary level should make serious and concrete alterations to the language education system. Practical steps to support this can include establishing a forum for English language teachers in higher education to exchange and share best practices for promoting autonomy, setting up a research center for language learning and autonomy to drive ongoing studies and improvement, and creating teaching and learning centers dedicated to developing learner-centered strategies. Such initiatives can foster teaching approaches that encourage learner autonomy and ultimately support effective language learning.

Teachers in the context under investigation should also acknowledge the pre-disposition of learners to be engaged in autonomous learning and not underestimate their ability to learn independently. Instead, they should trust in their inherent capacity for exercising autonomy. Teachers should create a conducive learning environment that nurtures and enhances these

autonomous capacities by involving learners actively and significantly in the decision-making process about their learning. In addition, since learning and autonomy are not solely cognitive abilities but also social activities involving interaction and collaboration (Reinders 2010), there should be an emphasis on fostering social interactions and collaborative opportunities among learners inside and outside the classroom using some online technologies to enhance both learning and autonomy.

9.4.1.3 Recommendations for Systematic Support and Integration of Blended Learning

Blended learning should be viewed as a promising and effective approach to enhance language learning and promote learner autonomy. Policymakers, educators, and teachers should consider integrating this model into the EFL teaching/ learning process. Furthermore, as evidenced in the findings of this study, students advocate for appropriate training to enhance the effectiveness of blended learning approaches. This training could include sessions to familiarize learners with digital platforms, as well as technical troubleshooting workshops to increase their confidence in using technology independently. Education authorities should also ensure ongoing support to address gaps in digital literacy. Additionally, training can also provide strategies on how to manage time effectively in the blended learning environment. Additionally, with growing concerns around accessibility, digital literacy, and the skills needed to study and teach using technology, it is essential to thoroughly assess potential challenges. Technology-driven approaches, without adequate consideration of the characteristics of the context where they are employed, are limited in their effectiveness.

Blended learning is still emerging in the Algerian context, to potentially, integrate it in the future, it is important to address also some pedagogical issues to identify and resolve challenges. Pedagogical practices have a greater influence on the learning outcome than technology, so the blended learning concept and pedagogical practices must be carefully considered to ensure successful and appealing results. For this reason, the researcher in this study would recommend exploring existing conceptual models to guide teachers in effectively integrating technology in teaching and enhancing their instructional methods such as the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model which discusses three primary forms of knowledge teachers need to successfully integrate technology use in the classroom. This model entails knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology (Mishra and Koehler 2006).

9.4.2 Suggestions for Further Research

The current investigation explored important issues about learner autonomy and blended learning, however, given that research is the primary means to deepen our understanding and inform our practices, further research on some important yet under-research areas becomes more demanding. The following research areas are put forward:

- More research is needed to explore EFL learners' practices in the face-to-face component of blended learning, focusing on how this specific component contributes to the overall success of blended learning in enhancing learning and autonomy. This exploration could provide further details on which aspects and practices promote the success of blended learning in the Algerian EFL context.
- Although this study investigated the impact of blended learning on learner autonomy and Algerian EFL learning culture, more targeted research could explore the different pedagogical practices that teachers adopt in blended learning, ideally from the perspective of EFL teachers. Such insights could help assess the effectiveness of the blended learning environment and identify areas for improvement.
- Further studies should investigate respect as a sociocultural construct affecting language learning and learner autonomy. Such research could particularly investigate how respect shapes learner-teacher interactions, the extent to which learners feel able to express their needs and preferences, and how respect is understood by both teachers and learners. Such insights could inform strategies to encourage learners to take more active roles in their language learning process, aligned with the specific sociocultural values embedded in the Algerian EFL educational context.
- This research primarily investigated Algerian EFL learners' autonomy in the blended context, however, examining the experiences of other parties and populations in the Algerian EFL learning environment such as teachers, and administration merits further research. Such research could reveal the roles of these parties in the overall success of the blended experiences.
- To develop a more comprehensive view of blended learning and its impact on language learning and autonomy in Algerian higher education institutions, it is essential to expand this research to other EFL departments in other Algerian universities with similar contexts. This expansion is recommended to explore whether the experiences of learners investigated in this study will be the same as those in other universities.
- Since learner autonomy develops within unique cultural contexts, further studies should

investigate how the general culture shapes and influences learner autonomy in the Algerian sociocultural context.

- Considering learners' feedback about teachers' insufficient support to develop their autonomy and be actively involved and engaged in their language learning process, it becomes imperative that further research employing valid methodologies to assess EFL teachers' practices in supporting learner autonomy takes place. Such insights could guide strategies for teacher development that support more autonomous EFL learning.
- Further studies could investigate the development of learner autonomy across different academic stages, including both undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students. Such research would help assess whether autonomous behaviors and perceptions vary across different levels of EFL educational experiences, allowing a deeper understanding of the capacities for autonomous learning in the EFL Algerian educational context.
- Given that the present study highlights the significance of resources in supporting learner autonomy and that AI tools have emerged as valuable resources since I collected data, further Studies could examine how these tools create a resource-rich language learning environment and the implication of this on learner autonomy. This research could focus on the extent to which AI resources and technologies influence learners' engagement with content and their capacity to self-direct their learning. Future studies could also examine the potential of these tools to provide real-time feedback and guidance concerning autonomy development. Such research may reveal new dynamics in learner-materials interaction, demonstrating whether AI-based tools encourage autonomous learning, informed decision-making, self-assessment, and deeper engagement with learning materials.

9.5 Key Contributions

I present in this section the research contributions to English language learning in the context under study. Moreover, I emphasize how this study can enhance the broader field of learner autonomy, especially regarding research methodologies to investigate the concept. The motivation behind investigating learner autonomy stems from my curiosity about why some learners are perceived as more autonomous than others across various learning contexts. Particularly I was keen to discover why many learners in my context are described as dependent and lack the willingness and motivation to engage in autonomous learning. Drawing from my own experience as a former student in a similar context, I have always been inclined towards

independence and have actively sought ways to enhance my language learning process. Although there was a continuous claim that learners lack readiness for autonomous learning, there had been almost no research that specifically examined the factors affecting this readiness and motivation, as well as learners' capacities for autonomous learning in different learning contexts. Therefore, I am certain that conducting research around this important area will make a valuable contribution to the existing knowledge on this specific issue and other related issues in my local context.

The key contribution of the current study is in terms of the socio-cultural dimension of learner autonomy. Although this research may be small and limited in scope, it offers new perspectives on how learner autonomy is perceived and practiced by learners within the context of their learning culture, and how the change in this culture can impact learners and their behaviors, a largely underexplored area. Learners' dependency and reluctance may stem from a learning environment that does not offer learners space to practice autonomy. This study also contributes to the ongoing debate on the appropriateness of learner autonomy in non-western contexts, supporting the view that learner autonomy is an innate capacity, a universal concept (Little 1991) compatible with different learning cultures. It suggests that autonomy is less dependent on the personal or cultural characteristics of learners but more on encouraging, autonomy-supportive language education systems and on the enabling resources (Palfreyman 2014) within learning environments. This perspective highlights that autonomy can be fostered in diverse contexts when the language learning culture and the educational environment actively support autonomous practices.

Moreover, another important contribution of this study is in suggesting blended learning as "an ecologically valid context" (Palfreyman 2014) where space for exercising autonomy is created. Blended learning provides the essential conditions to support learners' independence and autonomy. This includes characteristics such as flexible access to resources, different interaction and collaboration opportunities, enhanced learner-centered environment, increased engagement, adaptable learning paths, and many others, that all serve as fertile soil (Ghout-Khenoune 2021) for nurturing learner autonomy. The combination of structured support and independent learning makes blended learning an environment that fosters a balanced space where autonomy can flourish.

Another key contribution of this study lies in the methodologies and methods I used to investigate autonomy-related issues as they provide an in-depth exploration of learners'

experiences and perceptions. The use of narrative frames and in-depth follow-up interviews in this research can be claimed to have proven effective, offering valuable, insightful, and deep understanding of the complex issues examined. Indeed, they captured the complex and evolving nature of autonomy effectively, and in a way that traditional surveys or quantitative methods might not achieve. In particular, by allowing learners to articulate their experiences and reflect on their behaviors and practices in two different contexts namely blended learning and fully face-to-face learning, these methods provide a more enhanced understanding of autonomy and the factors that may encourage or hinder its development. Therefore, the specific methods and tools I used to collect data and the perspectives I focused on demonstrate how capturing personal and subjective narratives can reveal the internal processes, motivations, and contextual influences that shape autonomy. They thus could be suggested as effective approaches to investigate learners' autonomy and their perceptions and perspectives on their language learning experiences and contexts.

Another contribution of this research lies in my ethical commitment to exploring the phenomenon under investigation from the learners' perspectives, prioritizing and privileging their reflections, opinions, and voices throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. This commitment is closely linked to the usefulness of qualitative methodology used in this study which allows participants to express their experiences in a way that values their unique perspectives. I adopted this approach to address a gap in previous studies where learners' voices have often been overlooked, allowing learners to express, articulate, and reflect on their experiences, informing a deeper understanding of learner autonomy and other important language learning-related- aspects. Therefore, this alignment between my ethical values as a researcher and the strengths of the narrative approach highlights the importance I place on recognizing learners' voices in the language learning process.

Additionally, the approach used in the current study can be described as holistic and provides a perspective on learner autonomy which is context-sensitive and specific to the EFL language learning situation in Algeria. The learners I investigated in this study were examined in relation to their context because I was aware of and considered the different ways the context influences learners. Such an approach is promising for conducting research of a similar nature because it not only addresses my research questions but also aims to help English language learners develop their self-awareness to understand both their language learning process and their learning environment. I appreciate having contributed to making learners feel listened to as they expressed a desire for their voices to be communicated to the wider educational

community including fellow researchers, teachers, and education authorities. This is something I deeply value.

Furthermore, this study highlights another profile of Algerian EFL learners, demonstrating their readiness and capacities to learn autonomously. Besides, it emphasizes their capacity for autonomous behaviors and practices, enhanced self-awareness as learners, and ongoing reflection on developing language skills and competencies. This image is important as it reveals new characteristics of learners in the context under investigation, contrasting the one usually reported in the Algerian EFL literature and learner autonomy. The results from this study also emphasize a significant gap between learners' preferred learning and their actual experiences.

Finally, in the area of autonomy and learner awareness, this research further accentuates learners' contextual understanding. Learners have knowledge about their learning context and critically evaluate different learning aspects that they believe require change. This indeed contributes to pinpointing areas for improvement in the specific language learning context of Algeria.

9.6 Final Reflections on my PhD Journey

This chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, would be incomplete without reflecting on my own thinking and research journey, an essential characteristic of social research (Bryman 2012). This reflection allows me to consider the development of my perspectives and the impact of this research journey on me.

Throughout various stages of the current research, I have been critical of both the topic under investigation and adequate methods to investigate it and obtain quality data. Furthermore, I have reflected on my roles, perspectives, and values constantly considering how they might influence the conduct and the interpretation of the research findings. Consequently, I made it a point and ensured to explicitly articulate my research approach and the choices I made to gather and analyze data and interpret the findings. Additionally, I uphold an open-door policy for discussions and debates concerning the different approaches I used in this study. I think that fostering and maintaining critical and constructive discussions about different approaches to exploring social phenomena is indeed among the key aspects of high-quality research.

Embarking on a research project is a distinctive and unique journey, one from which I gleaned considerable knowledge and underwent profound professional and personal growth. At a

professional level, my understanding of learner autonomy, language education including teaching, assessment, material use, and many other aspects expanded significantly through the readings I did and the discussions I had with my supervisors and fellow PhD colleagues. Consequently, I started to view different aspects of language teaching and learning with fresh insights and new vision. Most importantly, I learned that before drawing conclusions on learners' behaviors and capacities, it is imperative to broaden my perspectives beyond the learners themselves and look elsewhere to include not only the environment but also the different agents of change such as teachers, policymakers, and even researchers. Particularly, investigating the different issues surrounding learner autonomy has raised my awareness of the critical and essential roles I can play as a future teacher in promoting autonomy especially within the studied context. Furthermore, I have shifted my perspectives on autonomy viewing it solely as an educational goal to recognizing it as an individual need requiring fulfilment and satisfaction. I am also grateful for the years spent researching the notion of learner autonomy, a knowledge that I will directly apply in my future practices with students. Although immediate change may not be forthcoming in Algerian higher education, as an influential agent of change, I will always remain committed to continuously practicing the fostering of autonomy in my everyday teaching practices.

This journey has also deepened my knowledge about social research, its philosophical foundations, and the potential impact context might have on conducting social research and how it can inform practices. Furthermore, I have gained valuable insights and acquired skills in qualitative research, which will prove beneficial in my future research investigations of different social issues in my context and disseminate findings through academic publications. Finally, I acknowledge that undertaking this research project has made me realize the importance and usefulness of research. I now firmly believe that before making judgments about any aspect within a particular context, it is essential to have a contextual understanding of that issue.

At a personal level, this journey has significantly and profoundly influenced me by instilling a commitment to rational thinking, critical analysis, and openness to various viewpoints even those in opposition to my own. Furthermore, I have developed a habit of always looking for evidence before making judgments. These are the qualities I consider to be among the many attributes I have cultivated during my PhD journey.

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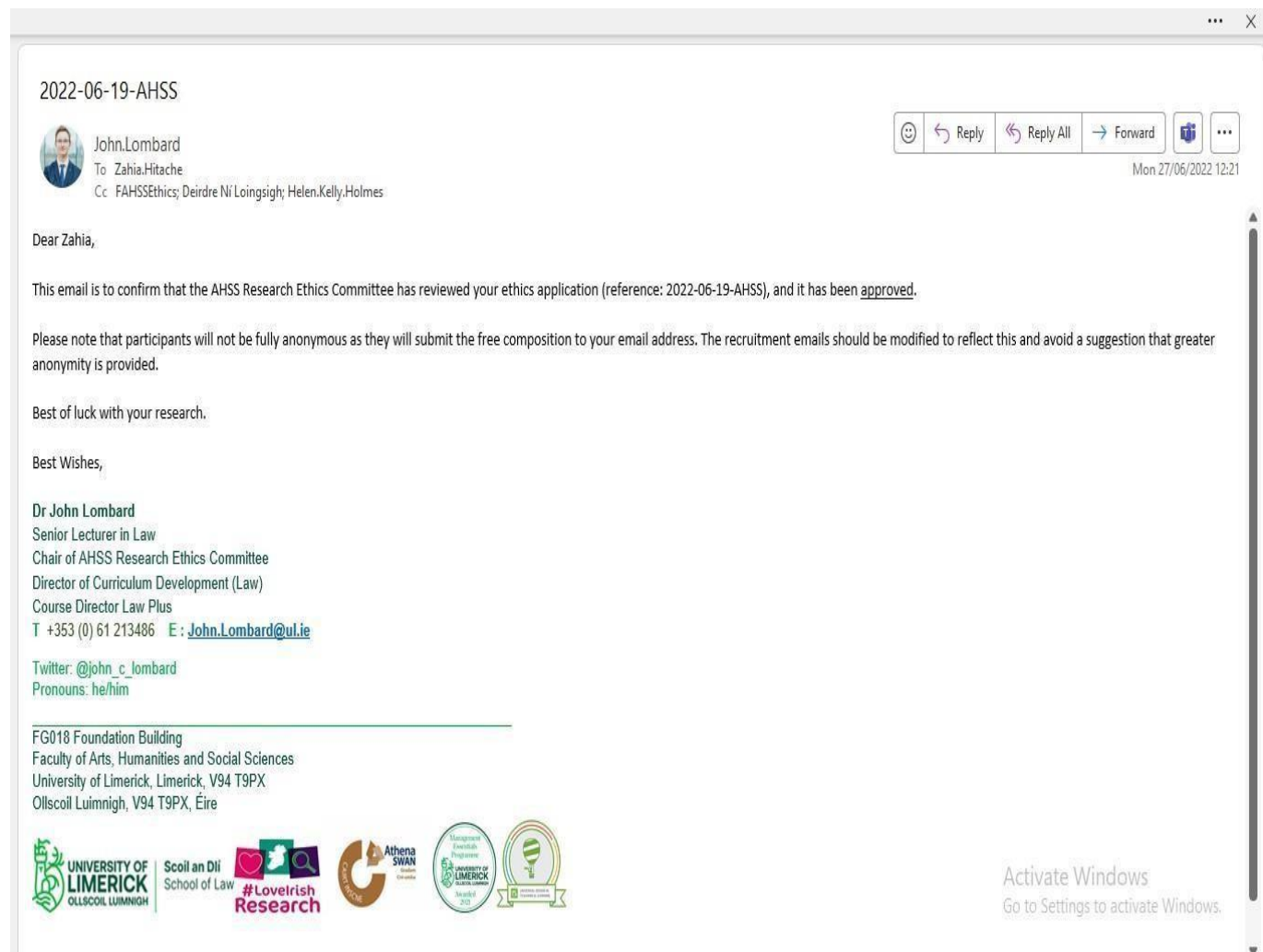
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Appendices

Appendix 1: UL PhD Research Ethics Approval Email



Appendix 2: Gatekeeper Recruitment Email



Recruitment Email (addressed to the gatekeeper)

Dear teacher,

My name is Zahia Hitache, and I am currently studying for a Ph.D. at the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at the University of Limerick, Ireland. As part of my studies, I am carrying out a research project entitled "Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL Learners' Autonomy". I am interested in how blended learning, as a new learning environment in the Algerian higher education institutions brings change to the learning traditions learners are used to and how this impacts the development of their autonomy.

This study aims to collect qualitative data through two methods: learner narratives/stories which will be used to elicit EFL learners' experiences in learning English language at university in a blended learning environment. Learners will be asked to produce a free composition at a time and place of their convenience, which will prompt them to speak about their experiences in the blended learning context. Online recorded interviews will be used as a follow-up and will help in exploring in more depth some of the aspects that influence the development of Algerian EFL learners' autonomy in the traditional learning environment; and, how the use of blended learning during the COVID 19 pandemic affected their learning habits in relation to autonomy. The interviews will be arranged at the learner's convenience and will last approximately 60 minutes. I would greatly appreciate it if you could forward the attached documentation to EFL students enrolled in the two year-EFL Master's program in your institution and invite them to take part in this project.

Participation is optional. Participants have the right to not answer questions and withdraw from the project at any time up to a period of 14 days after the data collection is completed. The participant's full anonymity is guaranteed, and no personal information will be made public.

If you have any queries or would like more information about the project, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Zahia Hitache

Email: zahia.hitache@ul.ie

Supervisors: Deirdre Ni Loingsigh

Helen. Kelly Holmes

Email: Deirdre.NiLoingsigh@ul.ie

Helen.Kelly.Holmes@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.....). If you have any concerns about this study or your participants and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

Chairperson Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

AHSS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel: +353 61 202286

Email: FAHSSethics@ul.ie

Best regards,

Zahia Hitache

Appendix 3: Learners' Recruitment Email



Recruitment Email

Dear student,

My name is Zahia Hitache, and I am currently studying for a Ph.D. at the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at the University of Limerick. As part of my studies, I am carrying out a research project entitled "Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL Learners' Autonomy". I am interested in your experience of blended learning, i.e. a mix of face-to-face teaching and online teaching and learning. This is something new that has expanded, particularly in the last two years due to Covid-19 and I would like to understand if, and how this has affected your learning and in particular your autonomy as a learner.

There are two parts to the study. You will be asked to write a free composition in which you will reflect on your experiences of learning English language at university in a blended learning environment. You may also be invited to take part in an interview as a follow-up.

There is no obligation to participate, but I would greatly appreciate it if you would take the time to read the attached information letter and research privacy notice and consider being a part of this research project. You have the right to not answer questions and withdraw from the project at any time up to a period of 14 days after the data collection is completed. Your full anonymity is guaranteed, and no personal information will be made public.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this email. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact

Principal Investigator: Zahia Hitache

Email: zahia.hitache@ul.ie

Supervisors: Deirdre Ni Loingsigh

Helen Kelly Holmes

Email: Deirdre.NiLoingsigh@ul.ie

Helen.Kelly.Holmes@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.....). If you have any concerns about this study or your participants and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

Chairperson Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

AHSS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel: +353 61 202286

Email: FAHSSethics@ul.ie

Best regards,

Zahia Hitache

Appendix 4: Participants Information Letter



FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE INFORMATION LETTER

Dear student,

My name is Zahia Hitache, and I am currently studying for a Ph.D. in TESOL at the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at the University of Limerick, Ireland. As part of my studies, I am carrying out a research project entitled "Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL Learners' Autonomy".

What's the study about?

This study is designed to develop a better understanding of the learning experiences of Algerian EFL learners in a blended learning environment in the higher education context, the influence of their past learning experiences on the development of their autonomy, and how the implementation of blended learning as a result of COVID 19 has changed their learning culture/habits and their autonomy development.

This study will use narratives or stories and interviews as data collection instruments. Learner narratives/stories will be used to help elicit learners' experiences in learning English language at university in a blended learning environment and how this impacted their autonomous behaviors. The online recorded interviews will be used to explore in more depth some of the cultures of learning aspects if any, that influence the development of Algerian EFL learners' autonomy in the traditional learning environment and how the use of blended learning during the COVID 19 pandemic affected their learning habits in relation to autonomy.

What will I be expected to do?

As a participant, you will be asked to write a detailed description of your experience of blended learning as an EFL student. You will be asked, for example, to write about your use of technology, your motivation as a blended learner and your attitudes towards this model of learning, your roles in this new learning environment, the type of activities you were engaged in, and how this new learning environment differs from the traditional language learning experience. You will be given the choice of selecting the language to be used in the production of stories (Tamazight, Arabic, French, English). Concerning the format of the stories, the length should not exceed 2000 words. Furthermore, to stimulate your imagination and focus your writings, some guidelines/prompts are going to be provided by the researcher.

The stories will be a free composition to be produced at your convenience in terms of time and place. However, you will be asked to submit the stories online through my professional email at zahia.hitache@ul.ie and if possible, in a word-compatible format.

Furthermore, you may be invited to take part in an online recorded interview in which you will be asked to respond to some of the researcher's questions about your previous learning

experiences which will help understand the influence of your learning culture on the development of your autonomy. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be held online via Microsoft Teams at your convenience.

The results that will be obtained from the data gathered will be of interest to education managers, teachers, and stakeholders who can use them to consider integrating blended learning technologies in language learning to foster learners' autonomy.

After expressing an interest in taking part in the project, you will be invited to an information session which is going to be held online via Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 30 minutes. The information session will be designed to explain in detail the project and the procedures and answer any questions you might have.

When and where?

For the production of the stories, you will be given complete freedom as to when and where to write them. The interviews will be held online via Microsoft Teams, and they will be audio recorded. Interviews will be arranged at a time convenient to you and will last approximately 60 minutes.

What if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely event that something goes wrong during the online interview, the interview session will immediately stop until the researcher and student(s) are ready to restart the session or the session will be stopped completely.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?

The information session is designed to explain in detail the project and the procedures and answer any questions you might have. I will make sure to leave sufficient time for this end. However, if you have any further questions about the study at any stage, you may contact me. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

Can I withdraw participation?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to take part or to stop your involvement in this study at any time up to a period of 14 days after the data collection is completed. simply contact me and I will see that your data is destroyed.

What about my right to anonymity and confidentiality?

The findings from the study will be written in my Ph.D. dissertation and may be published in academic journals/books and used in conference papers in the future. However, your personal identity will remain anonymous at all times. I will ensure that no clues to your identity and that of your institution appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say will be anonymized, i.e. names of persons and institutions will be either omitted or changed entirely (e.g. learner 1, learner 2, etc.), as appropriate.

► **What will happen to the data?**

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. On the contrary, I hope to provide some interesting insights into the positive impact technology has on education generally and on producing autonomous language learners who are capable of responding to the demand of today's education and society.

If you have any queries or would like more information about the project, please contact:

Principal investigator

Supervisors

Zahia Hitache

Dr. Deirdre NiLoingsigh Professor Helen Kelly-Holmes

Zahia.Hitache@ul.ie

deirdre.niloingsigh@ul.ie

helen.kelly.holmes@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (quote approval number). If you have any concerns about this study or your participation and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

Chairperson Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

AHSS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel: +353 61 202286

Email: fahssethics@ul.ie

Best wishes

Zahia Hitache

Appendix 5: Participation Consent Form



FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Ethical consent form

I, the undersigned, declare that I am willing to take part in research for the project entitled "Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL Learners' Autonomy".

I declare that,

- I have been fully briefed on the nature of this study and my role in it and have been given the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to participate.
- The nature of my participation has been explained to me, and I have full knowledge of how the information collected will be used.
- I am aware that my participation in this study will include the production of written stories and I agree to this.
- I am aware that my participation in this study may be recorded and I agree to this. However, should I feel uncomfortable at any time I can request that the recording software be switched off.
- I am also aware that I may request to view the anonymized transcripts of the recordings and if I so wish, to have parts of my discourse removed.
- I am also aware that any information, or recordings collected will be securely stored, and destroyed after seven years in line with the Data Protection Act.
- I am aware that such information may also be used in future academic presentations and publications about this study.
- I fully understand that there is no obligation on me to participate in this study.
- I fully understand that I am free to withdraw my participation without having to explain or give a reason, up to a period of 14 days after the data collection is completed.
- I acknowledge that the researcher does guarantee that she will not use my name or any other information, that would identify me in any outputs of the research.
- I declare that I have read and fully understand the contents of the Research Privacy Notice.

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix 6: Sample of Narrative Frame and Narrative Empty Box (Pilot Study)

Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL learners' Autonomy.

- Blended learning refers to an English as a foreign language course, which combines the traditional face to face classroom instruction and online learning
- Narrative frame refers to a written story template with a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying length which all provide guidance and support in both the content and the structure of your stories. The narrative frame scaffolds you to communicate your ideas in a particular form and in an organized way.

Instructions:

The narrative frame below contains sentence starters and connectives which you will be filled in your reflections. Our aim is to understand your experience of becoming a blended language learner, what has shaped your learning and what it means to be a blended language learner in relation to your autonomous behaviour's development. What we hope to hear from you are brief stories of how you feel about different aspects of your learning process and, in particular, how the transition from classroom to blended learning has changed the way you learn in relation to autonomy. Please read the whole pages before starting to write. If a particular sentence starter doesn't apply to you, just omit that bit, or strikethrough text that is not relevant. Furthermore, if you feel that the space provided is restricting you to communicate more ideas, please feel free to use the narrative empty box provided below.

My journey to learning English started.....

My EFL blended learning experience started when.....

At the beginning I felt.....

because.....

I think that EFL blended learning model is.....

The part that I like most is.....

As for the use of technology in my English language course, I found it.....

because.....

I liked/disliked my EFL learning experience which incorporated blended learning because.....
In addition, my EFL blended learning experience was.....
.....because.....

The lecture delivery method was.....
The assignments were.....
for example.....
As for the activities we were engaged in.....

For example, My favourite activities in my EFL blended learning experience include.....
Furthermore, I noticed that compared with fully face to face classroom learning, EFL blended learning is.....
.....probably because.....

Through the EFL blended learning experience, the areas in which I have made the most progress are.....

However, the areas in which I have made the least progress are.....

Another point I noticed was that blended learning made me feel more/ less responsible for my learning because.....

Moreover, I think that the EFL blended learning helped/ hindered my autonomous behaviours because.....

When I think about my roles as an EFL blended learner, I realise that the most important things I did and was responsible for is.....

My relationship with the teachers has.....
.....probably because.....

Furthermore, our teachers during this EFL blended learning experience were responsible for.....

Another important thing, the difference between my previous learning experiences and blended learning in terms of autonomy is my ability to.....



Zahia.Hitache



The highlighted sentence starters were removed for the main study. I mentioned the reasons in chapter four, section 4.6.3.2.1

Reply

Activate
Go to Settings

Overall, I think that.....

..... So, I would like to recommend/ not recommend the
EFL blended learning to others.

This is the end of my story.

Next stages

I would be willing to be interviewed online (via Microsoft Teams) by the researcher and for this to
be recorded and transcribed. My contact details are.....

The most convenient times for me would be

Narrative empty box

My EFL blended learning experience started

.....
.....

Now I can describe my experience in blended learning as

.....
.....

It helped me because

.....
.....

It challenged me because

.....
.....

My future expectations concerning the use of blended learning are

.....

Adapted from Rohman (2017)

Appendix 7: Interview Guide (Pilot Study)

A: Past learning experience: this part of the interview is about the phase of your English language learning experience in a fully face to face learning environment. The questions will be about the different aspects of your language learning.

1. What do you understand by “autonomy” or “independence” ?
 2. Can you please describe your role as an EFL learner in the learning process in an everyday lesson? what do you think affects your role? What do you think should change ?
 3. How do you describe your teachers’ role in your English language learning process? Which types of teachers do you prefer, the one who takes all the decisions concerning your learning process, i.e. decide what to learn type of activities ... or the one who shares the responsibility with you?
 4. In your opinion, was your language classroom a learner- centred or teacher centred?
 5. How is your progress evaluated? are you satisfied with this method of evaluation? Why?
 6. How do you describe the assessment/ testing procedures in your university? What do you think should change?
 7. What type of language learning activities do your teachers engage you in outside and inside the classroom?
 8. Were the language teachers encouraging you to learn the language outside the classroom? (Like finding information alone, doing extra readings, accessing other materials)
 9. Have you ever expressed a desire to work on your own? If yes, how was your teacher’s reaction?
-

10. In your opinion, are there any cultural influences on your ways of learning in terms of what you are allowed to do and what are not allowed to do?
11. Do you think you can choose what to study, when and how or not? To what extent? What affects that?
12. Can you talk about any difficulties that you face to be more independent and autonomous ?

B: Interview about your experiences in learning English in a blended learning context

This is the stage to explore how blended learning impacted your language learning process generally and your autonomous behaviours particularly.

- 1- How did the following aspects of your learning change after you started to study English language in a blended learning environment?
 - Activities and tasks
 - Testing methods
 - Decision taking
- 2- To what extent did the facilities like online resources and materials help you to enhance your language learning ?
- 3- What can be the problematic parts for you if a blended learning is decided to be implemented in the Algerian EFL context?
- 4- Would you like to add anything before we finish?

Appendix 8: Sample of Narrative frame and Narrative Empty Box (Main Study)

Investigating the Effect of Blended Learning on the Development of Algerian EFL learners' Autonomy.

- Blended learning refers to an English as a foreign language course, which combines the traditional face to face classroom instruction and online learning
- Narrative frame refers to a written story template. It is a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying length. These provide guidance and support in both the content and the structure of the stories. The narrative frame will scaffold you to communicate your ideas in a particular form and in an organized way.

Instructions:

The narrative frame below contains sentence starters and connectives. You are asked to fill in your reflections in a well-structured manner. My aim is to understand your experiences of becoming a blended EFL language learner, what has shaped your learning and what it means to be a blended EFL language learner in relation to your autonomous behaviour's development. What I hope to hear from you are brief stories of how you feel about different aspects of your learning process and, in particular, how the transition from classroom to blended learning has changed the way you learn in relation to autonomy. Please read the whole pages before starting to write. If a particular sentence starter doesn't apply to you, just omit that bit, or strikethrough text that is not relevant. Furthermore, if you feel that the space provided is restricting you to communicate more ideas, please feel free to use the narrative empty box provided below.

My journey to learning English started.....

My EFL blended learning experience started when.....

At the beginning I felt.....

because.....

However, I.....

was.....

I think that EFL blended learning model is.....

And the learning process in such an environment is.....

The part that I like most is.....

As for the use of technology in my English language course, I found it.....

.....because.....

I liked/disliked my EFL learning experience which incorporated blended learning
because.....

.....In addition, my EFL blended learning experience
was.....

.....because.....

My favourite activities in my EFL blended learning experience are

Some of the resources I used during my blended learning courses include

Furthermore, I noticed that compared with fully face to face classroom learning, EFL blended
learning is.....

probably because.....

Through the EFL blended learning experience, the areas in which I have made the most progress
are.....

However, the areas in which I have made the least progress are.....

Another point I noticed was that blended learning made me feel more/ less responsible for my
learning because

Moreover, I think that the EFL blended learning helped/ hindered my autonomous behaviours
because.....

When I think about my roles as an EFL blended learner, I realise that the most important things I did
and was responsible for is

Furthermore, my teachers during this EFL blended learning experience were responsible for

.....
Another important thing, the difference between my previous learning experiences and blended learning in terms of autonomy is my ability to

.....
Overall, I think that.....

..... So, I would like to recommend/ not recommend the
EFL blended learning to others.

This is the end of my story.

Next stages

I would be willing to be interviewed online (via Microsoft Teams) by the researcher and for this to be recorded and transcribed. My contact details are.....

The most convenient times for me would be

Narrative empty box

My EFL blended learning experience started

.....
.....

Now I can describe my experience in blended learning as.....

.....
.....

It helped me because

.....
.....

It challenged me because

.....
.....

My future expectations concerning the use of blended learning are

.....

Adapted from Rohman (2017)

Appendix 9: Interview Guide (Main Study)

A: Past learning experience: this part of the interview is about the phase of your English language learning experience in a fully face to face learning environment. The questions will be about the different aspects of your language learning.

1. What do you understand by “autonomy” or “independence” ?
 2. Can you please describe your role as an EFL learner in the learning process in an everyday lesson? what do you think affects your role? What do you think should change ?
 3. How do you describe your teachers’ role in your English language learning process? Which types of teachers do you prefer, the one who takes all the decisions concerning your learning process, i.e. decide what to learn type of activities ... or the one who shares the responsibility with you?
 4. In your opinion, was your language classroom a learner- centred or teacher centred?
 5. How is your progress evaluated? are you satisfied with this method of evaluation? Why?
 6. How do you describe the assessment/ testing procedures in your university? What do you think should change?
 7. What type of language learning activities do your teachers engage you in outside and inside the classroom?
 8. Were the language teachers encouraging you to learn the language outside the classroom? (Like finding information alone, doing extra readings, accessing other materials)
 9. Have you ever expressed a desire to work on your own? If yes, how was your teacher’s reaction?
-

10. In your opinion, are there any cultural influences on your ways of learning in terms of what you are allowed to do and what are not allowed to do?
11. Do you think you can choose what to study, when and how or not? To what extent? What affects that?
12. Can you talk about any difficulties that you face to be more independent and autonomous ?

B: Interview about your experiences in learning English in a blended learning context

This is the stage to explore how blended learning impacted your language learning process generally and your autonomous behaviours particularly.

- 1- How did the following aspects of your learning change after you started to study English language in a blended learning environment?
 - Activities and tasks
 - Testing methods
 - Decision taking
- 2- To what extent did the facilities like online resources and materials help you to enhance your language learning ?
- 3- What can be the problematic parts for you if a blended learning is decided to be implemented in the Algerian EFL context?
- 4- Would you like to add anything before we finish?

Appendix 10: Code Manual (Adapted from Aljazer 2015)

Code	Explanation of the code	Notes
Motivation and willingness	Learner autonomy is highly related to some of the learner's affective factors such as motivation and willingness. - How motivation and willingness shaped the EFL Algerian learners' experiences in learning English as a foreign language. - The effect of motivation and willingness on EFL learning.	- To what extent do these factors determine learner engagement in their foreign language learning in a blended learning context in terms of becoming autonomous and holding more responsibility for learning - The role of affective factors in becoming autonomous
Learning goals/ goal oriented	- Autonomy assumes some sort of goal. - Why did the learners engage in learning English as a foreign language? - Did the learners' specific goals affect their language learning experiences?	How do learners' learning-oriented goals lead to success in learning a foreign language in different contexts and learning environments?
Attitudes	the EFL learners' attitudes towards : - The blended learning model - The use of blended learning - The use of technology in language learning - Learning English in a blended learning context - Does blended learning develop learner autonomy	- The answers were mostly positive. - How do EFL learners describe their learning experiences in blended learning? Is it a positive or negative experience? - What are the attitudes towards using blended learning in relation to autonomy development?
Resources use	- Intentional use of different available resources. - How do EFL learners interact with the elements that are available in their learning environment? - How do EFL learners use the available resources to attain their learning objectives and facilitate their learning?	- The role of learners' awareness on becoming independent and autonomous learners. - The role of blended learning context in providing a range of interactive resources. - The relationship between the interaction with these resources and becoming autonomous.

	• Are EFL learners aware of and understand the resources available to them? • Are their actions informed, or non-determined? (independent actions to facilitate learning)	
The use of language learning strategies	• What language learning strategies do EFL Algerian learners use? (Cognitive, material, social, and affective.....) • Algerian EFL learners interact purposefully with their environment and make use of these strategies to improve their learning.	• The relationship between the use of language learning strategies in a blended learning context and the development of learner autonomy • Learners use a wide range of language-learning strategies
Responsibility for learning outside the classroom	• What are the EFL learners doing to learn the language outside the classroom? • Learners' independent actions and practices to learn the language outside the classroom have been traced especially during the online phase of Blended learning. • Most learners make different use of strategies for the language independently • I noticed that when learners are given opportunities to work on their own they show their autonomous behaviors.	• Blended learning enables learners to take more responsibility • Learner autonomy and responsibility for learning outside the classroom • Blended learning and responsibility for learning outside the classroom.
Limitations/ challenges/ constraints while studying in a BL context	• Elements such as Internet connectivity, lack of experience, the availability of devices, and technological literacy.... • What affected learners' experiences in a blended learning context • These challenges and constraints have affected learner's perception of the blended learning model use and implementation	• What EFL learners did to overcome constraints will show their ability to become autonomous • What did they do to cope with such challenges

Awareness	Learners' awareness about: • The requirement of a blended learning model • The affordances in their learning environment • The challenges in the learning environment • Both the driving and hindering forces in their learning context	• The autonomous learner is aware. • The relationship between awareness and autonomous learning
Blended learning advantages	• Elements like flexibility, freedom, managing learning, and studying at the learner's pace.... • What attributed to EFL learners' success in learning the English language in a blended learning context	• The relationship between these advantages and the development of learner autonomy • Do these advantages encourage learner autonomy?
Technology positive impact	• How did technology impact EFL blended learning experiences? • Technology facilitates and improves learning. • Technology offers a wide range of resources with which learners can interact independently to improve their language learning experience	• I noticed that learners resort to online resources at all times • Learners try to find their own paths using technology. • Learners use technology according to their purposes. • Technology enhances and encourages learner autonomy
Language learning activities inside and outside the classroom	• Learners are engaged in autonomous supportive activities like group work, reflection presentations, and project work. • Learners are more engaged with these activities in a blended learning context. • Most learners said that they do these kinds of activities outside the classroom. • Poor use of language learning activities inside the classroom in fully face-to-face learning	• Activities outside the classroom versus inside the classroom • The type of activities in a blended learning context (autonomous supportive activities) • Learners have negative attitudes towards the activities being used in full face-to-face learning. • Learner's claim for change
Independent practices and actions to learn the language	• Learners act independently to improve their language learning experience like reading books watching movies reading articles watching YouTube videos..... • The effect of such behaviors on developing their autonomy	• Independent learning and learner autonomy. • Blended learning encourages independent learning. • Blended learning changes learning habits in different ways

Blended learning impact on language learning	• Learners achieve the highest scores in their blended learning experiences • Learner's language learning skills development like reading, listening, and writing. • Blended learning and the development of different skills related to language learning like time management, resourcing, and use of technology	• The Effect of blended learning on EFL educational achievement • The effect of blended learning on foreign language learning
Blended Learning and learner autonomy	• Different aspects of blended learning that encourage learner autonomy • Blended learning and independent learning • Blended learning and responsibility for learning • Blended learning and planning for learning (what, when, and how to learn) • Blended learning and learner use of language learning resources • Blended learning and autonomous supportive activities • Technology is one aspect of blended learning that encourages learner autonomy	• What aspects of learner autonomy do the EFL learners show in their own language learning experiences in a blended learning context • Judging learners' autonomous profiles depending on the way they told their stories and articulated their actions • I noticed a change in learners' profiles as well as their perceptions of themselves and their teachers. • I noticed a change in learners' way of learning. • Blended learning encourages learner autonomy.
Blended Learning and Change in Teaching and Learning Methods	• How do teachers' roles change with the implementation of blended learning • How do learners' roles change with the implementation of blended learning • Learners 'perceptions about how they have been tested in blended learning. • Learners were engaged in different language-learning activities • Did the use of blended learning promote student-centeredness?	• Traditional Learning versus Autonomous Learning in a blended learning context • There is a noticeable change in the learning methods and environment as a whole
Learners' understanding of learner autonomy	• Because the EFL learners are being described as not being ready to be engaged in autonomous learning, I have asked them about their	• The EFL learners have a good understanding of learner autonomy and its requirements, however, they need to be provided

	understanding of learner autonomy. • The answers suggest that learners have a good understanding of learner autonomy. • The learners are aware of the requirements of an autonomous environment. • Good use of autonomy-related terminology • Their understanding of learning autonomy has helped them reflect well on their language learning experiences in both blended and face-to-face learning. • The student discourses reflect their understanding and awareness of learner autonomy	with opportunities to practice their autonomous behaviors. • They also need some guidance in doing so.
Students' roles	• How do EFL learners perceive the roles inside and outside the classroom • What learners perceive their roles to be in full face-to-face learning and blended learning (listeners, giving presentations, consumers of teachers' knowledge, a group working... • What are EFL preferences (following teachers' orders or working independently) • What influences their roles? • Were their roles affected by the use of blended learning?	• Most of the students perceive their roles as recipients of teachers' knowledge especially in face-to-face learning • Most students perceive their roles as working independently of their teacher, especially during their blended learning experience. • Learners claim for change in the way they are perceived by their teachers. • Blended learning affected learner's roles in different ways • Teachers power position
Teachers' roles (students' perceptions)	• Learners' perception of their teachers' roles (controllers, knowledge providers, prepare and give lessons, evaluate progress.....) • Do the learners think that their teachers provide them with chances to work autonomously? • Most students see teachers as the only authority in the classroom especially in face-to-face learning	• Students' Expectations and Teachers' real practices • Teachers' roles can limit what learners can do from the perspective of gauging their autonomous abilities. • Teachers power position • Blended learning has impacted the teachers' roles

	• Few opportunities are given to learners to work independently. • Teachers choose material use	
Barriers to learner autonomy (hindering forces)	• Elements such as teachers' roles, curriculum-based education, exam-based testing..... • How did memorizing for exams affect the EFL learner's learning autonomy • The Effect of language learning methods and the Environment • How does the role of teachers influence learners' development of learner autonomy • Some contextual and cultural factors hinder learners' autonomy development	• Traditional learning versus learner autonomy • The Effect of traditional learning on learner autonomy • Teacher-centeredness versus learner-centeredness • Characteristics of a traditional educational environment • Learner Autonomy and teacher power position • Characteristics of the educational culture • The educational culture influence on learner autonomy

Appendix 11: Blueprint for Themes Organization

Research Question	Related Themes	Data Source	Results
RQ 1: How do Algerian EFL learners perceive their experiences of blended learning ?	Blended Learning Experiences: Insights into Learners of English as a Foreign Language Learning Experiences	Narrative frames	Findings on learners' perceptions, emotions about different challenges, opportunities, and affordances in the blended learning context
Sub Q1: How do Algerian EFL learners perceive the blended learning model and blended technologies?	Navigating Blended Learning: Learners' First Impressions and Emotional Responses to Blended Learning	Narrative frames	Findings on learners' motivation and positive perceptions tied to engagement, flexibility, convenience and technology use
Sub Q2: How do Algerian EFL learners perceive the experience of learning English in a blended learning environment?	The role of Technology: Learning English as a Foreign Language in the Blended context	Narrative frames	Findings on the positive impact blended learning has on EFL language learning especially in terms of enriching the language learning environment through diverse resources and activities
Sub Q3: Are there specific challenges related to the Algerian context that need to be considered in the implementation of blended learning?	Embracing Change: Current Experiences and Future Expectations	Narrative frames	Findings in some potential constraints that need to be addressed for an effective implementation of blended learning
Sub Q4: To what extent do Algerian learners feel empowered to control	Fostered or constrained? Autonomy in the Blended Learning Context	Narrative frames	Findings on an increased control and responsibility in the blended context.

and take responsibility for their own learning in a blended learning context?			Findings on opportunities for independence as well as collaboration
RQ 2: How does blended learning influence the overall language learning environment and the development of EFL learner autonomy, particularly in relation to learners' practices, interactions, and affective factors?	Main theme: Manifestations of autonomy -Tracing Autonomy in learners' actions - Redefining Learners' Roles: Evolving Perceptions of Responsibility in Blended Learning Context -Teachers as Guides: Learners' Perceptions on Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities -The Affective Driving Force toward Autonomy: Motivation and Willingness	Narrative frames	-Findings on learners' awareness, independent and strategic interactions with their learning environment -Findings on learners' active participation in the learning process -Findings on a change in teachers' roles to become guides and feedback providers. -Findings on learners' high level of motivation driven by the flexibility and resources of the blended learning
RQ 3: To what extent does the culture of learning in the Algerian EFL context affect the development of learner autonomy?	Main theme: Cultural Influences: Autonomy in the Algerian English as a Foreign Language Context Autonomy in EFL Learning: Learners Perceptions and Understanding	Interview transcript	-Findings on the influence the Algerian culture of learning has learners' autonomous behaviours. -Despite their awareness of autonomy, learners in this context have limited chances to exercise their autonomous abilities due to some characteristics of the learning culture.
Sub Q1: What specific elements do Algerian EFL learners identify as barriers to developing autonomy in their language learning process, and do these constraints shape their	Challenges and Barriers to Autonomy: Learners' Experiences in the Algerian EFL Context	Interview transcript	Findings on the specific educational as well as cultural elements that inhibit learners' autonomous behaviours

learning behaviours and practices?

RQ 4: How has the widespread use of blended technologies as a result of COVID-19 impacted Algerian EFL learning culture and the fostering of autonomy?

Main theme: Blended Learning in the Algerian Higher Education: The Shift from Tradition to Innovation during COVID-19 Period -Exploring Teaching Methods and Decision-Making -Learners Experiences with EFL Language Learning Activities -Learners Experiences with EFL Language Assessment Methods - Resource Rich Environment: EFL Language Learning Materials	Narrative frames and interview transcript	Blended learning positively impacts different elements of pedagogy such as teaching methods, activities , assessment and allocation and resources, aligning with autonomous principles

Appendix 12: Pseudonyms Assigned to Participants for Data Anonymization



Name of participants	
Male participants	Female participants
Djamal	Yasmine
Lyes	Lynda
Yacine	Kenza
Anis	Wissam
Farid	Kamelia
Yanis	Dalila
Nordinne	Hanane
Walid	Tinhinane
Idir	Lamia
Farouk	Radia
Aylan	Taous
Fahim	Ryma
Kousseila	Sarah
Rayan	Souad
Toufik	Chabha