



The Algerian EFL Learners' Disposition Towards the Use of Collaborative Learning as a Means to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the Algerian EFL learners' beliefs about, and attitudes towards, promoting Learner Autonomy (LA) via the implementation of Collaborative Learning (CL) as a teaching method. The study was carried out at the Department of English of Mostefa Benboulaïd Batna 2 University during the academic year 2018-2019. To meet the paper's objectives, a quantitative approach was opted for where an adapted questionnaire was administered to the first-year students. The overall results revealed the positive disposition of the Algerian EFL learners towards the use of the CL teaching method as a channel to develop their autonomy.

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Introduction

In the last four decades, and in order to cope with the demands of the new world characterized by globalization and technology, education has witnessed major changes that made its boards and associates abdicate their orthodox teaching approaches in pursuit of more flexible and innovative teaching approaches. In the EFL context, Holec's report that he presented to the Council of Europe in 1979 entitled *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning* marked the shifting point in EFL learning. Holec presented LA as a skill that allows the EFL learners to meet their individual needs since, as Legenhausen (2008) pointed out, it is almost impossible to come up with a coursebook that "*can grade the linguistic material according to the linguistic needs of all the learners*" (p. 35). In other words, the learners' diversity and their different needs in the classroom posed a great challenge for the teachers to involve every single learner in the classroom, for every learner is relevant. Therefore, targeting LA as a desirable behavior for learners, especially at the university level, made it possible for those teachers to deal with the diverse needs of those learners and to help each individual to follow his own path.

Building on Holec's report, shifting from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness appears to be the first rational step towards autonomy. Unlike the former, the learning opportunities that learner-centeredness offers the learners in terms of learners' involvement, participation, discipline, and classroom management (Rogers & Frieberg, 1994) reflect the heart of independence and autonomy. In other words, learner-centeredness accounts for the fact that the

learning process must be more concerned with the learners' role rather than with the teachers' role or the materials to be implemented (Slavin, 1995). In the same context, Palmer (1998) believes that the essence of the teaching operation does not lie in the teaching action of the professors, but in the process through which learners learn and grasp knowledge; he adds that the teachers' role resides in creating the conditions that maximize the students' learning outcomes. Redefining the concept of teaching and changing the focus of the learning operation from the teacher to the learners makes learner-centeredness indeed "*a key rationale for learner autonomy*" (Murphy & Jacobs, 2000, p. 2)

Although settling on learner-centeredness as the starting point towards autonomy, the challenge resides in figuring out the next step. Defining LA as a state of being without much insinuation on the process through which it is achieved, Holec's definition of LA led the researchers of the field of autonomy to indulge themselves in a journey of finding appropriate approaches to develop the learners' autonomy. As a result, CL raised to be one of the most used approaches to develop LA worldwide. Therefore, investigating the nature of LA from different perspectives, the rationale behind it and suggesting CL as a potential solution to develop the Algerian EFL learners' autonomy represent the core of this paper.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Defining Learner Autonomy

Holec defined LA as "*the ability to take charge of one's learning*" (1981, p. 3); he believed that the learners are autonomous

when they acquire the ability to assume responsibility over their learning. In spite of setting the characteristic of an already autonomous learner, and not inferring the process through which the autonomous state is achieved, Holec's definition remains the cornerstone of the field of LA and the most used definition in the literature. Inspired by it, many researchers introduced their own versions of LA. Dickinson (1994), for instance, defines the autonomous learner as the one who has positive attitudes towards his learning; the one who is motivated and capable of making "*significant decisions about her learning,*" (p. 2). He emphasized the learners' willingness and ability to learn as fundamental characteristics for autonomy. In Benson's (2011) definition of LA, the term "*ability*" from Holec's definition was replaced by "*capacity to take control*" arguing that the weight and power of autonomy lies in the term "*control*" since it makes LA more adequate for empirical investigation, and gives a better representation of its multidimensional nature. Little, on the other hand, defines autonomy as "*a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action,*" (1991, p. 4) putting LA in the heart of psychology. According to him, a learner is autonomous when he has a certain level of independence that enables him to make the right decisions about his learning within the constraint of the society, since he believes that "*because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence*" (1991, p. 5). Kohonen (1992) accentuates the social nature of LA by adding the notion of interdependence to his definition of LA. He believes that personal decisions are bound by the social context

individuals belong to, and that they are bound to interact with others and engage in activities of social nature such as learning with peers or in groups. Thus, they have to assume their responsibility over these conducts, which will result in developing their interdependence and individual responsibility in the social context, key features of autonomy, for "*total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism*" (Little, 1991, p. 5).

2.2 Arguments for Promoting Learner Autonomy

The immense proliferation that LA has witnessed in the last forty years made educators consider adopting it when teaching. Dickinson (1994) pointed out the importance of LA for adult learners from the teacher's perspective, arguing that it is desirable to have self-reliant learners who have the ability to "*pursue learning projects autonomously*" (p. 2) instead of being implicated in developing teacher-dependent learners. Little (2006) conditions the success of learning with the presence of autonomy in learners. Legenhausen (2008) adds that learners should be allowed to identify and follow their linguistic needs by themselves since it has become impossible to figure out these needs at the individual level, and that the teachers' role is to guide and help them in the process. Furthermore, the continually societal, cultural, political, and professional demands (Macaro, 2008) that learners face forced them to "*embark upon a continuous process of retraining and acquisition of skills to deal with*" these "*complex challenges*" (Vázquez, 2016, p. 96), and urged for "*the implementation of a new paradigm in education*" (ibid). Therefore, the notion of LA

appeared as a response to the required characteristics of this paradigm (Vázquez, 2016).

In addition, LA proved its importance in many aspects of individuals' lives. From the psychological perspective, LA appears to play a critical role in shaping the learners' identity, raising their awareness about their objectives and granting them control over their lives (Kenny, 1993). It is also seen to grant the learners a chance to experience "*self-determination*" which is vital for the development of their intrinsic motivation (Ushioda, 2011). From the social perspective, "*to prepare learners for democratic citizenship*" (Vázquez, 2016, p. 100) is seen to be the chief purpose of LA since it "*supports the development of attributes and values which will enable individuals to play a significant part in a democratic society and to choose for themselves how to live their own lives*" (ibid).

Consequently, it appears that the implementation of LA in education is fully justified, for LA is not only a learning method that enhances learners' ability to learn, but represents a lifelong learning skill that allows learners to manage different aspects of their lives besides education.

2.3 Collaborative Learning as an Approach to Promote Learner Autonomy

CL appeared as an approach to promote LA as a response to the paradigm shift towards learner-centeredness that calls for the existence of LA especially in TEFL contexts where LA "*represents a significant manifestation of student-centric education*" (Jacobs & Tan, 2015, p. 3). Learner-centeredness entails involving learners in their

learning process by allowing them, to a certain degree, to assume control over the setting, content and materials of their lessons. Dickinson (1999) suggested collaborative skills as methodological preparations to handle these responsibilities. Holliday (2003), agreeing with Dickinson, believes that "*autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students which they bring with them*" (p. 117), which makes the individuals' interaction with their societies a key element for the development of LA. Therefore, CL becomes indispensable for the propagation of LA as a psychological capacity (Little, 1995).

Although the two notions, CL and LA, might seem paradoxical, Harmer (1998) explains the rationality behind using the former as a scaffold to promote the latter. He argues that the mood that envelops group activities presents the learners with a chance to achieve higher levels of independence pointing out to the opportunities of peer interactions, decision making, and sharing responsibilities that these activities offer the learner. In the same context, Geary adds that learners can go "*from dependence toward independence via interdependence*" (1998, p. 1).

To explain the process through which CL enhances LA, Murphey (1998b) presented a five-stage model that involves: *socialization*, *drawing metacognition*, *initiating choice*, *expanding autonomy* and *critical collaborative autonomy*. In the first stage, *socialization*, learners are introduced to their teams and groups, given the chance to know each other and pushed to engage in short conversations with their fellow group members. At this stage, the purpose is for learners to create a sense of belongings to their groups and to make this sensation part of their identities (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000). The

second stage is *drawing metacognition*, which denotes raising the learners' awareness about their learning through their interaction with their groupmates and peers. Indeed, such practices help them to reflect on their own learning habits when discussing their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors with their group members (ibid). *Initiating choice* marked Murphey's third stage towards autonomy at which learners are supposed to be experienced in teamwork; thus, learners are allowed to "*make choices about their learning, such as selecting from among a variety of activities to do, choosing from a number of options as to how to present their work, and having input on how assessment will be conducted*" (Jacobs & Murphey, 2000, p. 9). *Expanding autonomy* is Murphey's fourth stage towards autonomy. According to him, this stage is an expansion of the three previous stages. It is characterized by involving the learners in self-assessment activities as well as seeking their opinions concerning "*the most beneficial ways for them to learn*" (ibid). Having the freedom to choose their partners and groupmates and working with them beyond the classroom setting is another characteristic of this phase. *Critical collaborative autonomy* is Murphey's fifth and final stage towards autonomy; it represents the peak of the learners' autonomy. It involves, on the one hand, the learners' use of their cognitive and analytical skills from thinking, reading, writing, speaking and discussing to understand "*the deep meaning*" of the tools and materials used in their learning, and to link this meaning to their learning context (Shor, 1993). On the other hand, it helps the learners to "*find the right mix between working with others and doing one's own thinking*" (Murphey & Jacobs,

2000, p. 10), for the heart of critical collaborative autonomy is creating balance between the learners' identity as individuals and their identity as part of a group or a society.

Many studies proved the ascendancy of CL in promoting LA. Assinder (1991), for example, described her practical experiment of peer learning effect on the learners' autonomy as "*highly successful*" (p. 1). Her results detailed that her learners gained increased motivation and confidence, showed increased participation, communication, responsibility, commitment and they increased use of diverse skills and strategies. Furnborough (2012) proved in his study conducted on language learners of the Open University of the UK (OU) that the subjects of his study exhibited ethos of sharing experiences; furthermore, they have displayed more control over their learning when treating their learning collaboratively in comparison to when treating it competitively. Additionally, the recent findings obtained from Yasmin and Naseem's (2019) research on the prospects of promoting LA through CL have shown that "*collaborative learning is inculcating independence, responsibility, confidence, motivation, skills and positive interdependence which are required for autonomy promotion*" (p. 1). Besides, perhaps the closest conducted study to the Algerian EFL context was Blidi's (2017) research on Omani students that appraises the influence of CL on their readiness, willingness and motivation to promote LA.

However, unchecked supervision of the process may result in negative outcomes, such as "*negative interdependence, minimum peer interaction, lack of responsibility to give the*

fair share and overdependence on the peers” (Yasmin & Naseem, 2019, p. 71494). In order to regulate these negative outcomes and maintain balance between the learners, Jacobs and Tan (2015) suggested four principles to guide the teachers when implementing CL to promote LA. These principles were referred to as: *maximum peer interactions*, *equal opportunity to participate*, *individual accountability* and *positive interdependence*. *Maximum peer interactions* addresses the issue of participation in the classroom. In contrast to the traditional classrooms where the teacher, who represents the sole authority, grants the participation chance to only few fortunate students, we find that the maximum peer interactions principle grants every student in the classroom a chance to participate by encouraging them to interact and work together in pairs and in small groups. It aims to increase the learners’ activity level as well as to enhance their thinking skill (Kuhn, 2015). The principle of *equal opportunity to participate* seeks to restrict and eliminate group domination practices that one or more group members perform, because these practices will result in depriving the other group members from the “opportunities to exercise control over their own learning” (Jacobs & Tan, 2015, p. 6); it will also result in hindering the achievement of proficiency at the undertaken task (Jacobs & Tan, 2015). One way to avoid these problems is for teachers to make sure that the work is divided equally among the group members, and that every single member of the group is doing his own share of the task. Jacobs and Tan’s third principle is *individual accountability* through which they aim to feed the individual’s sense of responsibility towards the group or society that he belongs to; i.e., by making the learners understand the

importance of their work for the group’s advancement, teachers will not only pressure these individuals to carry out their work, but they will motivate them to do their best to complete it. The fourth principle, *positive interdependence*, is strongly related to, and completes, the previous one; if *individual accountability* raises the individual’s responsibility towards the group members, then *positive interdependence* establishes a supportive atmosphere between group members where they discuss the goals of the group, assess and evaluate each member’s work, suggest their ideas about their partners’ work, and finally organize their work as a whole and make changes if necessary.

In spite of the potential that it demonstrated in promoting LA, CL seems to be in abeyance in the Algerian context especially in the tertiary level where the majority of the Algerian universities are still opting for the traditional teaching approaches. The current paper is an attempt to integrate CL as a means to promote LA in the Algerian tertiary level as it investigates the attitudes and beliefs of the EFL learners of Mustapha Benboulaïd Batna 2 University towards it.

3. The Experiment

3.1 Aims of the Study

The aims of the study are:

1. Exploring the EFL students’ attitudes towards the implementation of CL as a means to promote LA.
2. Investigating the potential obstacles that may hinder the use of CL to promote LA.

3.2 Research Questions

The following research questions depict the objectives of the current paper:

1. What are the EFL students' preferred learning styles?
2. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards CL?
3. What are the EFL students' beliefs towards adopting CL as a means to promote their autonomy?
4. What are the potential difficulties that may face promoting EFL learners' autonomy via the implementation of CL?

3.3 Research Methodology

3.3.1 Research Method

When conducting the current study, a quantitative approach was opted for since it fulfills the requirement of the research, which is our interest in the Algerian EFL learners' attitudes towards the implementation of CL as a means to promote their autonomy as well as towards the barriers that they may face in the process. Therefore, a questionnaire was employed to answer the research questions since it is the most appropriate tool to collect a large amount of data concerning the participants' attitudes and opinions in a short amount of time. It also facilitates the process of data analysis and discussions.

3.3.2 Population and Sampling

A sample of 150 first year students of English from the whole population of 679 students at Mustapha Benboulaïd Batna 2 University represents the participants of the current

research; only 113 of them answered the elements of the questionnaire. The participants were randomly chosen.

3.3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The current study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019. Data were collected through a questionnaire that was administered to the first year EFL students of Mostefa Benboulaïd Batna 2 University. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section investigates the students' learning styles. The second section investigates the students' attitudes towards CL. The third section investigates the students' attitudes towards integrating CL as a means to promote their autonomy. The fourth and last section investigates the barriers that may hinder the implementation of CL as an approach that aims to develop LA. The elements of the questionnaire were based on Blidi's (2017) questionnaire which was based itself on a number of prominent researches namely: Cotterall (1995), Gardner and Miller (1999), and Reinders (2000).

3.3.4 Data Analysis

For data analysis we used the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 25 since the data were quantitative in nature. The findings then were presented in tables and organized to answer the research questions respectively.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The EFL Learners' Preferred Learning Styles

The first section of the questionnaire was dedicated to answer the first research question of our investigation: *What are the EFL*

Table 1: EFL Learners' preferred learning styles.

	Totally agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Totally disagree	
	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %
Prefer to be given assignments rather than choose	8	7.1%	13	11.5%	10	8.8%	49	43.4%	33	29.2%
Prefer to develop own independence	42	37.2%	39	34.5%	7	6.2%	11	9.7%	14	12.4%
Prefer to be told what to do	12	10.5%	15	13.3%	8	7.1%	43	38.1%	35	31%
Prefer group tasks	30	26.5%	53	46.9%	11	9.7%	13	11.5%	6	5.3%
Prefer to work alone	8	7.1%	21	18.6%	10	8.8%	51	45.1%	23	20.4%
Prefer to listen to others' ideas rather than develop own ideas	33	29.2%	56	49.6%	13	11.5%	8	7.1%	3	2.6%
Enjoy working with peers and classmates	46	40.7%	40	35.4%	6	5.3%	11	9.7%	10	8.8%
Learn more through group tasks and activities	28	24.8%	61	54.0%	9	8.0%	11	9.7%	4	3.5%
Like to discuss assignments with peers and classmates	30	26.5%	51	45.1%	12	10.6%	14	12.4%	6	5.3%

For instance, the first statement aims to inspect whether the first year EFL students at Batna 2 University prefer to be given an exact assignment over the opportunity to choose among a list of options. The results indicate that 72.6% of the respondents were in favor of allowing them to choose among a list (disagree: 43.4%, totally disagree: 29.2%); they believe that a better learning can only be achieved when learners are part of their learning process, which goes in agreement with Blidi's (2017) view of the autonomous

students' preferred learning styles? Thus, it assesses the extent to which the first year EFL learners at Batna 2 University are ready to develop LA. It is composed of 9 statements designed to collect information about the students' learning habits. The results are shown in Table 1.

learner's role in the classroom. On the other hand, a proportion of 18.6% of the respondents (totally agree: 7.1%, agree

11.5%) still believes in the teacher-centered learning approach where the teacher holds the whole responsibility of the classroom management. The learners' preference for the teacher-centered learning approach is believed to be due to the learners' lack of exposure to novel and autonomous learning strategies. The remaining 8.8% of the respondents dwell undecided.

The second statement aims to inspect the learners' attitudes towards developing their

own independence when learning; thus, the development of their own autonomy. The majority of the respondents (71.7%) consider autonomy and independence as desirable goals that will help them in their journey of pursuing knowledge especially that they are at the tertiary level (totally agree: 37.2%, agree: 34.5%). The results are indications of the learners' awareness about the importance of autonomy in learning and their positive attitudes towards adopting it. Meanwhile, the minority of 22.1% of the participants (disagree: 9.7%, totally disagree: 12.4%) showed a negative attitude towards developing own independence and autonomy, which might be due to their attachment to the learning methods that they were used to when they were in their secondary level of education. The last 6.2% of the participants remain undecided.

The third statement of the first section of the questionnaire is pretty similar to the first one; its purpose is to seek the learners' attitudes towards limiting their freedom and involvement in the learning process. We found that 69.1% (disagree: 38.1%, totally disagree: 31%) of the participants do not prefer to be told what to do when they are in tasks and activities believing that it restricts their creativity, which is a tangible evidence of the learners' readiness to work on promoting their autonomy. A percentage of 7.1% of the participants appear to be uncertain on this matter, and the other 23.8% of the participants (totally agree: 10.5%, agree: 13.3%) are in favor of being told what to do, which is a characteristic of what Dickinson (1994) referred to as "*teacher dependent adult students*" (p. 2).

The fourth statement investigates the learners' tendency towards working in groups. According to the statistics, 73.4% of the participants (totally agree: 26.5%, agree: 46.9%) believe in the concept of CL and see it as a learning approach that invests time and effort, and they consider it as a means to overcome learning obstacles. On the contrary, a minor percentage of 16.8% of the participants (disagree: 11.5%, totally disagree: 5.3%) found themselves opposed to this concept and fixed upon a more individualistic learning approach.

In the same vein, the fifth statement of the questionnaire completes the previous one wherein it investigates the learners' attitudes towards working alone. The results show consistency with the results of the previous statement. They show that only the minority of the participants have opted for the individualistic learning approach 25.7% (totally agree: 7.1%, agree: 18.6), whereas the majority of 65.5% (disagree: 45.1%, totally disagree: 20.1%) were in derogatory towards working alone. The results are also proof that the first year EFL students at Batna 2 University distinguish between independence which is a characteristic of autonomy and individualism which refers to detachment from the society.

The sixth statement was designed to investigate the learners' opinions about teamwork. The statistics show that 78.8% of the participants (totally agree: 29.2%, agree: 49.6%) think that working in groups motivates them to be involved and to participate in learning. It also allows them to exchange their ideas and experiences with their groupmates and to create an atmosphere of positive interdependence among their

group members; thus, it offers the learners with more learning opportunities and moves them one step ahead towards autonomy. At the same time, 9.7% of the participants (disagree: 7.1%, totally disagree: 2.6%) exhibit a tendency to develop their own ideas, and 11.5% of them appear to be uncertain about their learning strategy.

The seventh statement was implemented to explore the learners' motivation for and willingness to CL. Statistically speaking, 76.1% of the respondents (Totally agree: 40.7%, agree: 35.4%) find pleasure in working with peers and classmates due to the informal and stress-free learning opportunities it provides for learners. Hence, CL offers us a window to exploit the learners' motivation and willingness towards it to steer their learning vehicle towards autonomy, for motivation and willingness are very effective to develop LA. On the contrary, the minority of 18.5% of the respondents (disagree: 9.7%, totally disagree: 8.8%) do not have the willingness to nor the motivation for work with their peers and classmates.

The eighth statement evaluates the learning outcome of the CL activities. From the results, the majority of 78.8% of the learners (totally agree: 24.8%, agree: 54%) seem to believe that they learn more when they are engaged in group tasks and activities. The results show signs of developing interdependence among the learners which provides a supportive environment for them to promote their autonomous learning skills.

The ninth and last statement of the first section of the questionnaire aims to scrutinize whether the learners prefer to discuss assignments with peers and classmates. The results show that 71.6% of the participants

(totally agree: 26.5%, agree: 45.1%) desire such opportunities, which signifies that the learners perceive CL as *"a stage towards learner autonomy development within a gradual approach that helps learners build self-confidence and self-esteem, which will ultimately enable them to develop learner autonomy"* (Blidi, 2017, p. 39).

The results obtained from investigating the EFL students' preferred learning styles strongly allude to the first year EFL students' awareness of the concept of LA and their positive attitudes towards it. In addition to that, the results show that they prefer a more flexible learning condition that assures their involvement in learning, grants them some degree of control over their learning, and decreases their teacher reliance level. The results also show signs of the learners' inclination for CL opportunities where they prefer group tasks over working alone, enjoy working and discussing assignments with peers and classmates, and learn more through group tasks and activities in comparison to individual assignments. All of which advocates the use of CL as a tool to promote LA in the Algerian tertiary context.

4.2 The EFL Learners' Attitude Towards Collaborative Learning

Investigating the EFL learners' attitudes towards CL as a learning approach depicts the mainstream of the second section of the questionnaire. The first question, for example, explores the existence of any kind of CL tutoring lesson that guides them to work in groups or with their peers. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that only 27.4% of the learners were fortunate to have such lessons in their classrooms, whereas the majority of 72.6% of the learners did not have such

opportunities, which means that it is up to teachers to decide whether to provide such lessons to their learners or not. The results imply the absence of a unified curriculum that

provides the same learning opportunities to the whole first year EFL learners and stresses the need for the implementation of such a curriculum.

Table 2: CL tutoring classes.

Is there any form of workshops or lessons that train students and guide them to properly work in groups or with peers in your classrooms?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	31	20.7	27.4	27.4
	no	82	54.7	72.6	100.0
	Total	113	75.3	100.0	
Missing	System	37	24.7		
Total		150	100.0		

The second question, however, investigates the effectiveness of those lessons in providing the learners with the CL skills. The results, as shown in Table 3, indicate that the majority of 83.9% of the learners have a positive evaluation on the lessons, where 54.8% of them have rated them as “*highly efficient and*

sufficient”, and 29% of them have rated them as “*partly efficient and sufficient*”. Therefore, it is a conclusive evidence on the importance of providing the learners with workshops and lessons that grant them a better performance when opting for CL as a leaning approach.

Table 3: The success of tutoring CL classes.

If your answer is ‘Yes’, how do you rate the success of the lessons in providing students with the required skills? Tick the right box.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Highly efficient and sufficient	17	11.3	54.8	54.8
	Partly efficient and sufficient	9	6.0	29.0	83.9
	Undecided	1	.7	3.2	87.1
	Barely efficient and sufficient	4	2.7	12.9	100.0
	Total	31	20.7	100.0	
Missing	System	119	79.3		
Total		150	100.0		

The third and final question in this section deals with the students’ attitudes towards the frequency with which they were engaged in

CL opportunities. The results entail that 79.7% of the learners believe that they were not engaged in enough CL activities rating the

frequency of these opportunities as “*barely enough*” (48.7%) and “*not enough*” (31%), emphasizing the severe lack of these activities

in their classrooms and their willingness and readiness for more CL opportunities

Table 4: Evaluation of the CL opportunities frequency.

How do you rate the frequency with which students are asked to work in groups or in peers? Tick the right box.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Largely enough	6	4.0	5.3	5.3
	Just enough	10	6.7	8.8	14.2
	Undecided	7	4.7	6.2	20.4
	Barely enough	55	36.7	48.7	69.0
	Not enough	35	23.3	31.0	100.0
	Total	113	75.3	100.0	
Missing	System	37	24.7		
	Total	150	100.0		

The second section of the questionnaire proves that the first year EFL students at Batna 2 University have a positive attitude towards the implementation of CL as a learning approach in their curriculum. In addition to that, it stresses the teacher’s role in the CL activities wherein the teacher’s guidance plays a critical role in their success, clearing the misconception related to CL that Blidi (2017) referred to as the “*teacher’s obsolescence*”. Hence, the results prove that the Algerian students’ perception of the teacher’s role in CL, guidance, is much similar to the one of the autonomous classrooms, which is another evidence that accentuates the compatibility relationship

these two concepts have, and that supports the paper’s assertion that the Algerian EFL learners’ autonomy can be promoted via CL.

4.3 The EFL Learners’ Attitudes Towards Promoting Learner Autonomy Via Collaborative Learning

The third section of the questionnaire aims to inspect the learners’ perceptions of CL as a means to develop LA. In this section, the participants were offered six statements that define the ways through which CL may promote their autonomy. The overall results determine their views (Table 5).

Table 5: EFL learners' attitudes towards CL as a means to promote LA.

	Totally agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Totally disagree	
	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %
Working in groups opportunities										
Facilitate learning independently	34	30.1%	49	43.4%	9	8.0%	13	11.5%	8	7.1%
Enhance discipline	38	33.6%	53	46.9%	7	6.2%	10	8.8%	5	4.4%
Offer opportunities to interact with teachers	30	26.5%	58	51.3%	7	6.2%	15	13.3%	3	2.7%
Offer opportunities to exchange information with peers	25	22.1%	59	52.2%	5	4.4%	17	15.0%	7	6.2%
Help develop learning strategies	47	41.6%	42	37.2%	8	7.1%	12	10.6%	4	3.5%
Enhances students' readiness and willingness to develop autonomy	44	38.9%	50	44.3%	6	5.3%	9	8.0%	4	3.5%

From the results shown in Table 5, the respondents' answer to the first statement, "facilitate learning independently", indicates that the majority of the learners (73.5%) believe in the potentiality that CL has in promoting LA (totally agree: 30.1%, agree: 43.4%). It appears that the learners believe that by working in groups, they develop a sense of "individual accountability" (Jacobs & Tan, 2015) towards the other members of their groups, which pushes them to carry out their share of the assignment independently within the supportive atmosphere provided by their groupmates; thus, the learners gradually develop their autonomy.

The second statement, "enhance discipline", scrutinizes the CL approach effect on the learners' commitment to their learning. The results indicate that 80.5% of the learners agree on the CL approach ability to equip

them with the "construct of attitudes and abilities" that "allow them to take more responsibility for their own learning" (Benson, 1997, p. 19), which defines the psychological perspective of LA.

The third statement of this section of the questionnaire, "offer opportunities to interact with teachers", aims to investigate the learners' beliefs about the role of their interaction with their teachers in their autonomy. Based on the results, it is safe to conclude that the majority of the participants (77.8%) are convinced that the interaction opportunities that the CL approach grants them have a grand effect on their LA development (totally agree: 26.5%, agree: 51.3%), for their interactions with their teachers redefine the traditional role of the teacher who represents the sole authority and the only source of information to the one of

collaboration and partnership that grants the learners the chance to be part of their learning process instead of being mere passive recipients. Indeed, these characteristics corral under the same umbrella with Allwright's (1979) characteristics of the teacher in the autonomous classrooms:

responsible teaching involves the sharing of responsibilities, not merely (or even mainly) because they are too much for any one person to bear, but because assuming management responsibility has a very important contribution to make to the learning experience of the learners. (p.118)

In accordance with the third statement, the fourth one, “*offer opportunities to exchange information with peers*”, investigates their opinions about the effect of their interaction with each other and the exchange of information on their autonomy. Similar to the previous statement, the results show an overall agreement among the learners where 74.3% of them who answered as (totally agree: 22.1%, agree: 52.2%) lean towards the positive impact that these interactions have upon their mastery of LA skills. Blidi (2017) clarifies the process through which peer interactions develop LA arguing that “*being autonomous and self-directed does not necessarily mean learning alone only and discarding peer support. There is an implicit collaborative element in autonomous learning since learners have to interact, negotiate and collaborate with peers*” (p. 14).

The fifth statement attempts to figure out if the learners believe that CL helps them to develop their learning strategies. The statistics above justify the effect of CL in developing the learners' autonomy; they reveal that the majority of the learners (88.6%) reckon that

CL plays an important role in augmenting the efficiency of their learning strategies (totally agree: 41.6%, agree: 37.2%). It seems that the learning opportunities that CL offers the learners when interacting with their teachers and peers help them seek advice concerning their learning strategies. In addition, it appears that these interaction opportunities allow them to gain experience from their peers' learning strategies, which helps them to adjust their learning strategies to fit their needs and to become more autonomous learners.

The sixth and last statement dealt with the learners' beliefs about the impact of CL on the learners' readiness and willingness to develop autonomy. The statistics show that 83.2% of the learners (totally agree: 38.9%, agree: 44.3%) believe that the CL approach enhances their readiness and willingness to develop autonomy. In light of the position of readiness and willingness in Dickinson's (1999) definition of LA, it is safe to assume that CL is indispensable for the development and promotion of the learners' autonomy.

The third section of the questionnaire successfully answered the paper's inquiry about the EFL students' beliefs towards adopting CL as a means to promote their autonomy. The statistics were conclusive; they have proven that the majority of the first year EFL students at Batna 2 University believe in the direct and indirect positive impact of CL upon the promotion of LA. According to them, CL represents the channel through which they will be able to reach the next level of autonomy. It helps them to learn independently through building their sense of personal accountability towards their group mates when having group assignments; therefore, it enhances their discipline for learning and raises their awareness about it. It

transforms the learners from the passive recipient learners of the traditional classrooms to the active participants of the modern classrooms, which grants them more learning experience through interacting with teachers and peers. In addition to that, it directly affects their motivation and ability to learn autonomously through enhancing their readiness and willingness to develop autonomy. In brief, the Algerian EFL learners postulate the adequacy of CL as a learning approach to promote LA.

Table 6: CL implementation challenges.

	First		Second		Third		Fourth		Fifth		Sixth		Seventh	
	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %	Count	Table N %
No free time	7	6.2%	12	10.6%	16	14.2%	20	17.7%	27	23.9%	31	27.4%	0	0.0%
Not part of assessments	31	27.4%	27	23.9%	18	15.9%	5	4.4%	7	6.2%	25	22.1%	0	0.0%
No preference for working in groups	12	10.6%	7	6.2%	10	8.8%	16	14.2%	51	45.1%	17	15.0%	0	0.0%
No one available to support and guide	20	17.7%	17	15.0%	42	37.2%	23	20.4%	8	7.1%	3	2.7%	0	0.0%
Not requested by the teacher	27	23.9%	41	36.3%	8	7.1%	11	9.7%	9	8.0%	17	15.0%	0	0.0%
Lacking the skills required to work in groups and use resources	16	14.2%	9	8.0%	19	16.8%	38	33.6%	11	9.7%	20	17.7%	0	0.0%
Other	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 6 summarizes the learners' beliefs about the order of importance to which the challenges that face the implementation of CL are classified. It has been found that the learners' first reason for their hesitation towards engaging in CL with a percentage of 27.4% of the respondents is for its being "*not part of assessments*", which points out the Algerian EFL learners' priority of getting good marks over learning, hindering in the process their pursuit of autonomy. Being "*not requested by the teacher*" represents the learners' second reason for not engaging in CL (36.3% of the respondents). It appears that the teacher's input regarding this matter is of high

4.4. Challenges that Face EFL Learners When Engaging in CL

The fourth and last section of the questionnaire addresses the hindrances that prevent the Algerian EFL learners at the tertiary level from engaging in CL. The learners were offered seven possible hindrances that may hamper them when engaging in group work, and they were asked to classify them according to their importance. The results obtained are shown in Table 6.

value; in other words, the learners' tasks and assignments given by the teacher decide the nature of the learners' learning approach, individual or collaborative, used to develop LA. The learners' third reason for not engaging in CL is the absence of guidance and support, "*no one available to support and guide*", which again emphasizes the learners' convictions (37.2% of the respondents) about the critical role that teachers play in teaching them the required CL competences and promoting their autonomy in the process. The learners' fourth reason for not engaging in CL with a response percent of 33.6% is "*lacking the skills required to work in groups and use*

resources". Its position as fourth in rank per priority decreases its relevance in obstructing the learners' engagement in CL; it appears that either the majority of the first year EFL learners at Batna 2 University do not lack the required skill for CL, or do not consider lacking these skills a hindrance that may drive them away from CL; both of which reduces its relevance in driving away the learners from CL and hindering their LA development. Lying at the bottom of the list, it seems that *"no preference for working in groups"* and *"no free time"* are considered to be the learners' least challenges when it comes to CL challenges. Through their rank as fifth with a percentage of 45.1% and sixth with a percentage of 27.4% respectively, one may conclude that the Algerian EFL learners do not lack preferences for working in groups and engaging in CL, nor do they lack time to be indulged in CL. For the seventh challenge, *"other"*, in which the learners were offered the chance to mention any other challenges that they see relevant to the issue being investigated in this section of the questionnaire, no answers were found. Thus, the main challenges related to the implementation of CL as a means to promote the Algerian EFL learners' autonomy at the tertiary level were all being covered by this section of the questionnaire.

This section's overall results abridge the Algerian EFL learners' challenges that prevent them from engaging in CL to the top three factors: *"not part of assessments"*, *"not requested by the teacher"* and *"no one available to support and guide"*. A closer look at these challenges leads to conclude that they are teacher-related. In other words, the teacher has the ability and authority to at least reduce the challenges' effect on the learners' attitude

towards CL, which can be done through including the CL activities, tasks and assignments in assessments, following a more direct approach when assigning learners for group work, and being more assertive when offering learners guidance and support.

4.5. Recommendations

The exploration of the first year EFL learners' perceptions towards the usefulness of CL as a means to promote LA at Batna 2 University indicates that the Algerian EFL learners are well aware of the merits that CL has in relation to their autonomy. The results showed their awareness of the nature of autonomy and their readiness to promote it via the use of CL techniques. They have elucidated their preference for CL as a learning approach, and have acknowledged the learning experiences they may gain concerning the development of their autonomy when adopting it as a learning strategy. In addition to that, the results showed the process through which CL promotes LA; the learners believe that their involvement and participation, classroom interactions, and control over their given tasks and assignments when engaged in CL opportunities enhance their autonomy through mainly developing their sense of independence, responsibility, confidence, and motivation for learning. On the other hand, the results revealed that although the substantial benefits that CL bears for learning and autonomy, less than the third of the first year EFL learners at Batna 2 University were fortunate with a chance to take part in CL. In addition to that, the results shed light on the challenges that may encounter learners if they take part in CL. Based on the obtained results concerning the learners' beliefs about the use of CL as a means to promote LA, we recommend the following:

➤ Explicitly inform the learners about their learning habits and raise their awareness about the implication of these learning habits upon the development of their autonomy.

➤ Encourage the teachers to switch from the traditional teaching methods featured by teacher-centeredness to the learner-centered methods.

➤ Design a curriculum that encourages the use of the collaborative learning approach to promote the learners' autonomy.

➤ Equip the Department of English with facilities and venues that allow the implementation of collaborative learning.

➤ Teachers should apprehend their function during the collaborative learning process as they are responsible for designing the collaborative learning tasks as well as managing these tasks in the classroom to ensure their success.

➤ Encourage learners to attend workshops and training lessons that train and guide them to properly work in groups or with peers.

➤ Allow learners a certain degree of control over their learning to ensure their involvement and participation in the learning process

➤ To ensure optimum outcomes, teachers hold the responsibility of monitoring group members and ensuring their participation in the CL tasks through complying to Jacobs and Tan (2015) principles

➤ Learners should be aware of the expectations and merits of the CL approach:

developing responsibility, independence, motivation...etc.

➤ Teachers should increase the frequency to which they engage their learners in CL activities as well as include these activities in assessments and evaluations.

5. CONCLUSION

The current paper explored the possibility of promoting the Algerian EFL learners' autonomy via CL. It reviewed their learning habits, perceptions of CL, attitudes towards implementing CL to promote their autonomy as well as the challenges that may face them in the process. The results were in line with Blidi's (2017) study. The Algerian EFL learners' reported attitudes showing a wide turnout for using CL as an instrument to promote LA. Their learning habits showed their readiness to develop their autonomy. They believe that "*participation precedes learning*" (Bateson, 1994, p. 41), which represents the essence of the first step towards LA, learners-centeredness. The opportunities that CL offers cover this point in addition to several more attributes of LA such as independence, responsibility, accountability and motivation. Teachers, on the other hand, have a critical role in helping the learners to overcome the challenges they face when engaging in CL; they also can assure the success of this instrument in promoting LA by following Jacobs and Tan's (2015) suggested principles when implementing it. To sum up, the obtained results support the paper's claim to promote the Algerian EFL learners' autonomy through CL. Therefore, we invite the curricula designers to consider the integration of CL in the curriculum of the

first-year undergraduates at the Department of English.

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7. Appendices

Students' Questionnaire

Dear student, this questionnaire is a part of a research that aims to investigate students' beliefs about using collaborative learning to promote learner autonomy. In order to help us collect data, you are kindly invited to answer this questionnaire.

Section 1: EFL learners' preferred learning styles

Please read the statements carefully then write the number that corresponds to your opinion.

1: Totally agree 2: Agree 3: Undecided 4: Disagree 5: Totally disagree

	Statement: I	Opinion
1	Prefer to be given assignments rather than choose	
2	Prefer to develop own independence	
3	Prefer to be told what to do	
4	Prefer group tasks	
5	Prefer to work alone	
6	Prefer to listen to others' ideas rather than develop own ideas	
7	Enjoy working with peers and classmates	
8	Learn more through group tasks and activities	
9	Like to discuss assignments with peers and classmates	

Section 2: EFL learners' attitude towards collaborative learning (learning in groups):

1. Is there any form of workshops or lessons that train students and guide them to properly work in groups or with peers in your classrooms?

Yes _____ No _____

2. If your answer is 'Yes', how do you rate the success of the lessons in providing students with the required skills? Tick the right box.

Highly efficient and sufficient	Partly efficient and sufficient	Undecided	Barely efficient and sufficient	Inefficient and insufficient

3. How do you rate the frequency with which students are asked to work in groups or in peers? Tick the right box.

Largely enough	Just enough	Undecided	Barely enough	Not enough

Section 3: EFL learners' attitudes towards collaborative learning (learning in groups) as a mean to promote learner autonomy.

1. For statements 1–8, write the number that corresponds to your opinion.

1: Totally agree 2: Agree 3: Undecided 4: Disagree 5: Totally disagree 6: Not applicable

	Working in groups opportunities	Opinion
1	Facilitate learning independently	
2	Enhance discipline	
3	Offer opportunities to interact with teachers	
4	Offer opportunities to exchange information with peers	
5	Help develop learning strategies	
6	Enhances students' readiness and willingness to develop autonomy	

Section 4: Difficulties that face EFL learners when engaging in learning groups

1. Why do students refrain from engaging in group learning activities? Put the reasons that you find valid in the order of importance according to you.

	Reasons	Opinion
1	No free time	
2	Not part of assessments	
3	No preference for working in groups	
4	No one available to support and guide	
5	Not requested by the teacher	
6	Lacking the skills required to work in groups and use resources	
7	Other...	

