



Investigating the Teachers' Application of Socio-Cognitive Theory to Promote EFL Students' Autonomy Case Study: Third- Year Students in Kasdi Merbah University, Ouargla, Algeria

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Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the teachers' implication of Socio-Cognitive Theory to promote EFL students' autonomy. It was significant in the sense that it attempted at investigating the teachers' implication of Socio-Cognitive Theory in promoting their students' autonomy and indicating the usefulness of Socio-Cognitive Theory in assisting teachers to promote their students' autonomy. The descriptive method was the one used in this research in which a teachers' questionnaire was addressed to both EFL teachers at Ouargla University and EFL third- year students from the same university for data collection. It was found that EFL teachers implemented Socio-Cognitive Theory in their classrooms and were aware of it. In addition, this theory was workable for boosting autonomous learning. But, on the other hand, it was revealed that teachers confirmed their students' disinterest for becoming autonomous. Then, it was recommended to make a good rapport with students to enhance their students' autonomy.

Keywords: Students' autonomy, self- independence, self-regulation, socio-cognitive theory, teachers.

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Introduction

Students' autonomy has been a vital focus in educational practice. Fostering students to be autonomous can be achieved in various ways, and for this reason, several researchers tried to investigate how autonomy can be developed among students; particularly, foreign language (EFL) ones. In its part, the socio-cognitive theory can address special contribution to the development of language learning classroom, through the implementation of its basic concepts such as self-regulation, self-efficiency, and human agency. In Algeria, some works have dealt with students' autonomy but far from the Socio-Cognitive Theory (Hadi, 2012; Feidjel, 2013). For this reason, the current paper aimed at investigating its implementation in the Algerian context by EFL teachers for promoting university students' autonomy.

Basic Principles in Socio-Cognitive Theory of Learning

Socio-Cognitive Theory was founded by Bandura (1986). According to him (1986, p, xi), it is "a framework for analyzing human motivation, thought, induction". (cited in Cochran & New, 2007, p. 734). Although Bandura referred to the behaviorists' believe that learning can shape one's personality, he did not support the idea of conditioning since human beings can "process information" (Dana et al, 2012, p. 48) upon it. In other words, he posted that behavioral theory was mechanical, thus he proposed this theory as a bridge between behavioral and cognitive learning theories.

Bandura's theory describes human agency as one characteristic of human beings. It is defined as "the capacity to exercise self-direction through control over one's thought processes, motivation, and action" (Nelson-Jones, 2011, p. 257). People are defined by their capacity to regulate, plan, and produce an action that is preferred because of its outcomes. Human agency's operation is conceptualized in three important ways. Firstly, autonomous agency is the one where individuals act independently. Secondly, mechanical agency refers to all that influences human actions mechanically regardless of motivation. Thirdly, emergent interactive agency introduces triadic reciprocal causation. The triadic reciprocal causation model argues that individuals' actions are the result of interacting among the environment, person, and behavior.

Personal agency is characterized by four main features which are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-effectiveness (Bandura, 2006). Each feature has its meaning; for example, intentionality is the intention that is formed to plan actions. It is mainly based on self-motivation (Bandura, 2006). Besides, forethought is to cover projected goals and predicted outcomes though presenting them cognitively; however, this property is not enough for human agency. Self-reactiveness is needed to be taken into consideration too, and it is related to the self-evaluation of ones' functioning and motivation.

Students' Autonomy

Students' autonomy is particularly important in the language learning process. It has been integrated into language education since the 1970s (Hadi, 2012). The first definition of this concept was held by Holec (1981, p. 3) as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (cited in Blidi, 2016, p. xxiv). This means that being autonomous is combined with the students' ability to bear the responsibility for various elements of the learning context, but, this definition was developed by replacing some keywords with others. For example, the word ability is replaced by capability, and the whole expression "take control of" (Benson, 2001, p.47) replaces "take charge of". Such replacements are done to facilitate conducting studies about

students' autonomy like setting goals, selecting activities, and monitoring outcomes (Murray et al, 2011).

There are several characteristics of autonomous language students. First, they should be an agent because the improvement of students' autonomy requires the frustration of their agency (Nakata, 2014). Brown (2014, p. 102) defined agency as "an individual capacity for self-awareness and self-determination: decision-making, ability to enact or resist change, and take responsibility for actions". The meaning of this definition is almost closed to Bandura's one that is mentioned above. Moreover, Blidi (2016, p. xxiv- xxv) proposed features of autonomous students: "risk-taking, self-reflection, self-awareness, creativity, flexibility, and the ability to think critically and analytically". Therefore, self-reflection is another feature that must be possessed by students so that they can become autonomous. This means that the capacity of monitoring and evaluation of one's work is highly required. In its turn, self-regulation is an effective characteristic of the autonomous learner (Nakata, 2014). Throughout the language learning process, the notion of self-regulation needs to be incorporated into the frame of learner autonomy.

Socio-Cognitive Theory and its Impact on Students' Autonomy

The four features of human agency are applicable in the EFL classroom. Bembenutty et al (2015) demonstrated the relationship between Bandura's properties of human agency and classroom context. They also stated that "consistent with Bandura's four core properties of human agency, skilled students are those who independently activate cognition, affect, and behavior to pursue goals and reflection outcomes" (2015, p. 13). This definition of skilled learner can go in parallel with what Little (2007) suggested about autonomous students. He declared that they can be responsible for all the decisions as setting objectives, monitoring the process of acquisition, and evaluating what he has been acquired (Little,2007). Moreover, each of these decisions is mentioned in Bandura's four features of human agency. Setting objectives is introduced in the forethought, monitoring is mentioned in self-reactiveness, and evaluating is stated in self-reflectiveness.

Self-regulation is a key concept in Socio-Cognitive Theory. It was presented in the self-reactiveness feature of human agency. This concept was defined by Rahimi (2015, p.11) as "the ways in which students take control of their own learning". It is important to highlight this concept in the teaching-learning context because it indicates the students' success and growth. Lipnevich et al (2016, p.216) stated that "under the umbrella of Socio-Cognitive Theory, research on self-regulated learning has practical application to the classroom context and instruction that are far-reaching". In this sense, there is a clear contribution of self-regulation to the learning process since it fosters students' abilities and motivates them to be autonomous. This idea was supported by Rahimi (2015, p. 11) saying that "self-regulation can foster students' autonomy because it provides them with scaffolding in using strategies that they could not previously do without the assistance and self-regulation skills".

Research Methodology

Aim of the Study

The present study attempted:

- 1) To investigate the teachers' implication of Socio-Cognitive Theory in promoting their students' autonomy
- 2) To indicate the usefulness of Socio-Cognitive Theory in assisting teachers to promote their students' autonomy.

Research Questions

This study is been a query to arrive at answers of these:

- 1) To what Extent do EFL teachers implement Socio-Cognitive Theory for promoting their students' autonomy?
- 2) To what extent can Socio-Cognitive Theory help teachers to promote their students' autonomy?

Sample

Our descriptive research targeted teachers of English at the department of English in Kasdi Merbah University and their students of third year level. The expected number is sixty students and these participants are selected due to their profession, talking about teachers, and due to their level that enables them become autonomous, talking about teachers. Students selected in this research are in a situation wherein autonomy is necessary and crucial especially as they are to be majored in specialties recommending autonomy.

Data Collection Tools

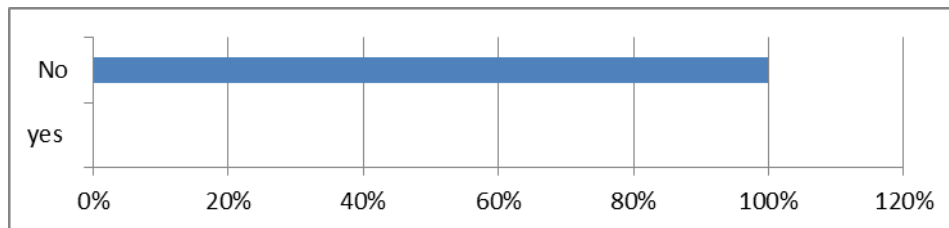
Participants of the research are two: sixty students of English at Kasdi Merbah University and four teachers of English from the same University. Both samples are given two different questionnaires one for students and the other for teachers respectively. Our paper tended to measure the extent to which students are autonomous as long as their teachers apply the Socio-Cognitive Theory.

Results

Teachers' Questionnaire

This teachers' questionnaire was planned to answer the first research question. It was administered to four EFL teachers who teach in the University of Ouargla. This questionnaire consisted of 9 questions. It was divided into three parts; the first one was about the background knowledge, the second one was about students' autonomy, and the third one was about Socio-Cognitive Theory.

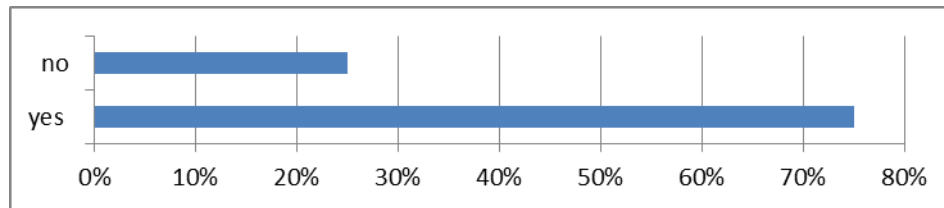
Do you think that your students are autonomous?



Graph 1: Teachers' opinions about their students' autonomy

This graph attempted at investigating the teachers' opinions about their students' autonomy. It was found that the total number of the respondents (100%) answered with 'no'. That is to say, they confirmed that their students are not autonomous.

Do you implement specific strategies in order to promote your students' autonomy?



Graph 2. The implementation of the strategies for promoting students' autonomy

The fourth graph demonstrated results about the implementation of the strategies in order to promote the students' autonomy. The findings showed that great number of the participants (75%) answered with 'yes', yet only (25%) of them answered with 'no'. in its meaning, the majority of the participants implemented strategies so as to boost students' autonomy. They added comments as follows:

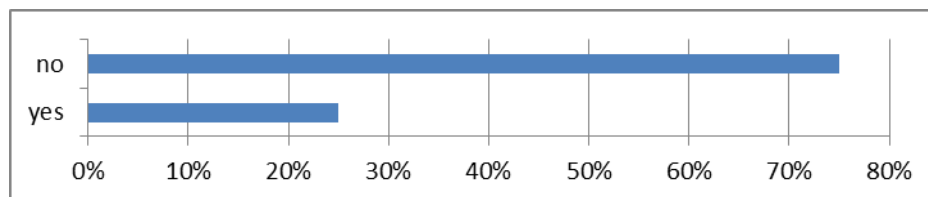
If yes, what are they?

(T1) said: "assign self study books to students willing to be autonomous".

(T2) declared: "activities that promote group and individual work".

(T3) stated: "I sometimes ask them to read more documents".

Are your students interested in becoming autonomous?



Graph 3. Students' interest to be autonomous

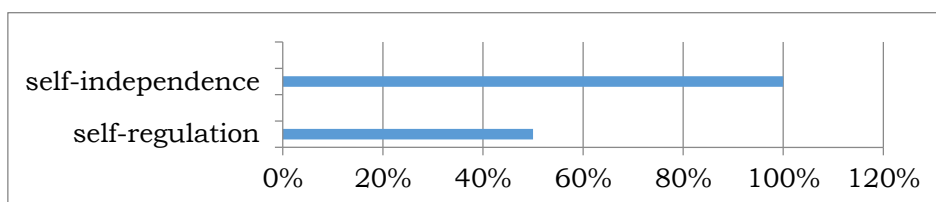
This graph aimed to show whether students of these teachers were interested to be autonomous or they was not. Undesirably, it was found that the majority of the respondents (75%) answered that their students were not interested in becoming autonomous.

If no, why?

(T1) argued: "because they grew up to valuing marks not knowledge"

(T2) justified: "they rely on others"

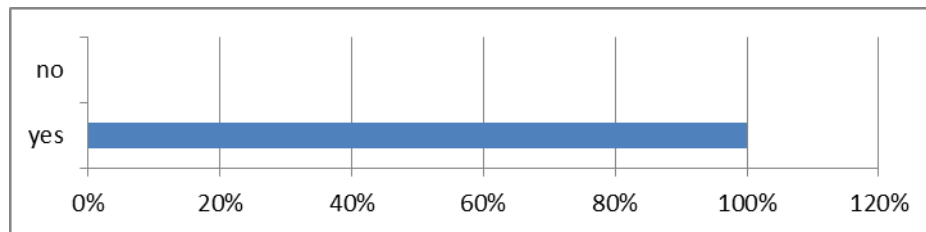
According to you, what are the main features of an autonomous learner?



Graph 4. The main features of autonomous learner

This graph attempted at highlighting the main features of autonomous learner. In here, the respondent had the freedom to choose more than one answer. The results revealed that (100%) of them chose 'self-independence', yet only (45%) of them selected 'self-regulation'. Nonetheless, none of the teachers chose 'self-efficacy' and 'others'.

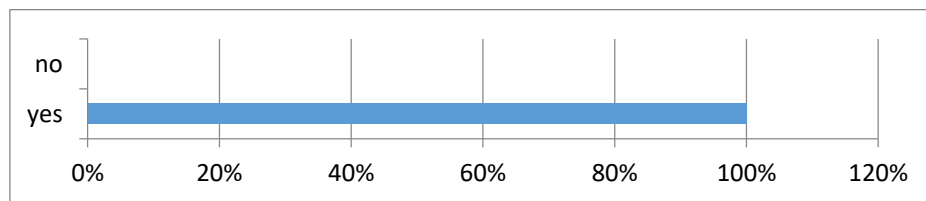
Did you get to know the term socio- cognitive theory before you were handed this questionnaire?



Graph 5. The teachers' familiarity with "Socio-Cognitive Theory"

The seventh graph aimed at investigating the teachers' familiarity with the Socio-Cognitive Theory. It was found that the whole number of the respondents were familiar with this theory.

Do you think that Socio-Cognitive Theory can be applied to improve students' autonomy?



Graph 7. The usefulness of Socio-Cognitive Theory in improving students' autonomy

This graph attempted at investigating the usefulness of Socio-Cognitive Theory in improving the students' autonomy. The results addressed that the total number of the participant answered with 'yes'. In its meaning, they confirmed the usefulness of this theory in boosting the students' autonomy.

How can Socio-Cognitive Theory be workable to improve students' autonomy?

The last question in this questionnaire was an open one so as the respondents can express their point of view freely. It was addressed in order to highlight the extent to which can Socio-Cognitive Theory be workable to improve the students' autonomy as it was shown in the following comments:

(T1) said: "by leading students to sources of knowledge in environment"

(T2) stated: "Making the class working as one community to accomplish a task"

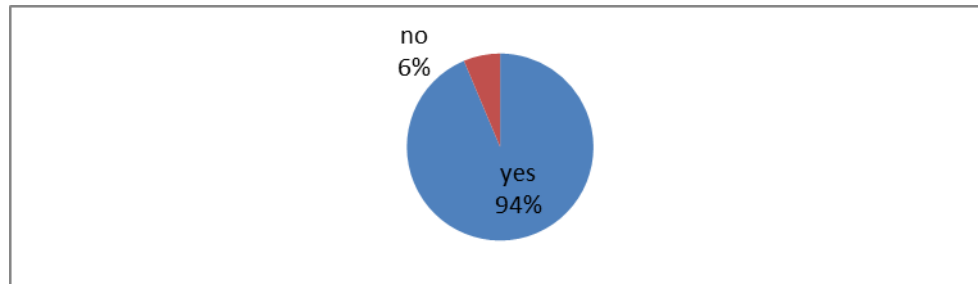
(T3) justified: "showing them how to be motivated in learning"

(T4) illustrated: "social –cognitive theory may be applicable as a method to enhance students' abilities, skills through providing them with the model to emulate because behavior is learnt as a hidden curriculum as a type of socialization".

Students' Questionnaire

This students' questionnaire was planned to answer the second research question. It was administered to 50 EFL students who study in the University of Ouargla. This questionnaire consisted of 6 questions. It was divided into three parts; the first one was about the background knowledge, the second one was about students' autonomy, and the third one was about Socio-Cognitive Theory.

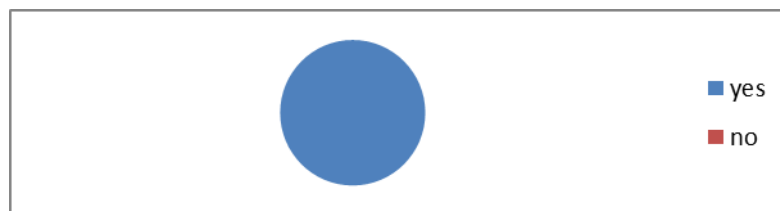
Do you prefer to be autonomous in your learning?



Graph 8. The students' preference to be autonomous

The above graph aimed at investigating whether the participants preferred to be autonomous or they did not. The findings designated that (94%) of the respondents preferred to be autonomous; however, just (6%) of them did not show their preference towards being autonomous.

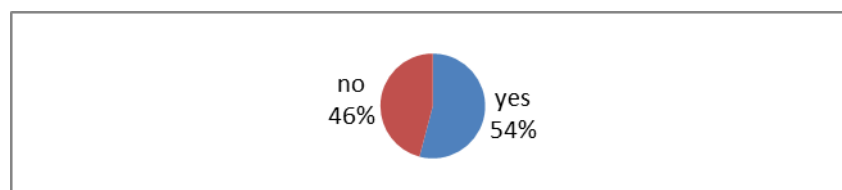
Does your teacher implement strategies for promoting autonomous learning?



Graph 9. Their teacher's implementation of the strategies for boosting autonomy

The main aim behind this question was to identify the students' attitudes towards their teachers' integration of the strategies for promoting autonomous learning. Surprisingly, it was found that the whole number of them (100%) answered with 'yes'. That is to say, they confirmed the fact that their teachers tried to implement the strategies which promote autonomous learning.

Have you ever confronted the term 'Socio-Cognitive Theory'?

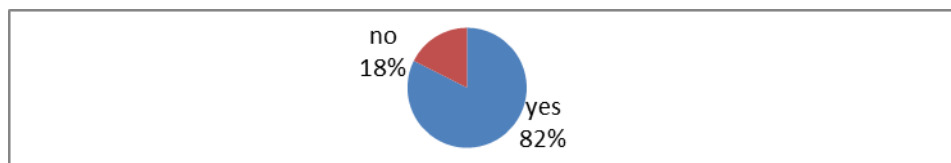


Graph 10. The students' familiarity with 'Socio-Cognitive Theory'

The fifth graph presented data about the participants' familiarity with the Socio-Cognitive Theory. It was found that the percentages were not extremely different from each other. In its meaning, those who answered with 'yes' were (54%), yet the

rest were (46%). Consequently, we can say that nearly half of them were familiar with this theory.

Do you think that the Socio-Cognitive Theory has a link with autonomous learning (its meaning is in the questionnaire)?



Graph 11. The link between Socio-Cognitive Theory and autonomous learning

The above graph addressed data about the relationship between Socio-Cognitive Theory and autonomous learning. The majority of the respondents (82%) chose 'yes'; as a result, it can be deduced that there is a relationship between them. From the other side, a minority of them (18%) answered with 'no'. In addition, those who said 'yes', they add their justification as follows:

If yes, justify

(S1) justified: "because both of them are related to human emotions"

(S2) explained: "because when you are familiar with these elements, it is easier to select the right lectures and topics"

(S3) said: because autonomy means exactly what Socio-Cognitive Theory build on motivation".

(S4) claimed: "because it has relation between human motivation, thought, and action"

(S5) justified: "it gives more control for the learner to regulate his learning methods".

(S6) explained: "because everything is related to the mental process"

(S7) demonstrated: "they complement each other"

(S8) clarified: "because it motivates the learner"

Discussion

This paper was designed around two research questions. The findings of the first research question demonstrated that EFL teachers from our sample implemented the major principles of socio-cognitive theory such as self-regulation and self independence for promoting their students' autonomy. Besides, they tried to use the strategies which can facilitate encouraging their students' autonomy. In their turn, the findings of the second research question revealed that the socio-cognitive theory was workable in assisting EFL teachers from our sample to enhance their students' autonomy.

Significantly, Socio-Cognitive Theory was viewed as an important element in the process of teaching and learning English according to the data obtained. Teachers' answers highlighted the importance of Socio-Cognitive Theory in promoting students' autonomy; teachers responded as their awareness of its necessity was needed and this was a major step in supporting students to become autonomous. As it was predicted, the participants were not aware about its importance only; they were additionally familiar with it. In fact, being familiar with it and its importance can raise the opportunity of its application among those participants.

However, their answers showed undesirable results about their students' interest for becoming autonomous. The majority of them argued that their students were not interested for being autonomous. This result goes in parallel with the literature review as: "students are not ready to take charge of their learning" (Hadi, 2018, p.5). However, the paradox here referred to the fact that the students showed their interested to be autonomous unlike what was declared by their teachers. This mismatch between the students' answers and the teachers' ones may be occurred due to the misinterpretation of this term because it is puzzle word as Kadi (2018, p. 169) stated: "learner autonomy is a diverse, dynamic, and difficult concept to define". That is to say, teachers and students can interpret autonomy differently; the fact that constructs a barrier for its implementation.

Another possible cause behind this mismatch may refer to the lack of using the most suitable strategies that promote the students' autonomy under the principles of socio-cognitive theory. Actually, many students' responses demonstrated that their teachers used to use strategies which promote autonomous learning; but not all the teachers declared that they adopted such strategies. Therefore the lack of integrating such suitable strategies in their classes may affect negatively their students' readiness to become autonomous in their learning process. Based on the two principles of Socio Cognitive Theory which are self- independence and self-regulation, university EFL teachers can select the most workable strategies that assist them to maintain autonomous learning.

Thus, it was recommended to make a good rapport with students so as to have the right interpretation of the term autonomy. It is much more workable if both teachers and their students will agreed upon one common useful meaning of the term autonomy and they highlight the major feature of autonomous learner. In addition,

Conclusion

To conclude, this article investigated the application of Socio-Cognitive theory to promote EFL students' autonomy. It was designed around two basic research aimed in which the researcher investigated the EFL University teachers' application of Socio-Cognitive Theory in promoting their students' autonomy and to indicate the usefulness of this theory in assisting teachers to promoting the autonomous learning. In order to achieve these two basic aims, a descriptive method was adopted where the researcher used a questionnaire for both teachers and students. Thus, the results obtained from both teachers and their students showed that EFL teachers who teach in Ouargla University implemented Socio-Cognitive Theory for promoting their students' autonomy. It was found as well this theory was workable and useful for encouraging autonomous learning among their students. Despite of the vital role of the teaching- learning strategies in assisting teachers for boosting their students' autonomy, some teachers did not adopt them. The latter might be the major reason behind the students' disinterest for being autonomy. Consequently, it is recommended to adopt strategies that fit the main principles of Socio-Cognitive Theory for promoting the students autonomy.

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