



**LEARNER'S AUTONOMY:
A CRITICAL STUDY AND RESEARCH PARADIGM
FOR ELT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Abstract:

Autonomy in learning has been viewed by many scholars in 21st as an approach enabling to hold the power or right to regulate, control and govern own learning activities. The idea of autonomy is fundamental to liberal philosophies which see the central goal of self-improvement as the development of independent minds and hence the capacity for independent action. The latter traces back its origin in ancient Greek philosophy in the idea of self-mastery and determination for both Plato and Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics (1166a 17-19). However, this approach is still a debatable subject when a critic scholar comes to evaluate its application in ELT. Teachers in DRC still play dominant role; hence, learners' autonomy toward decision-making and problem -solving is still ignored. The latter spend 11 years in ELT Class learning from secondary school to university but unable to communicate in English. The present paper has raised the question of how to improve English Language Teaching and learning curriculum from Teacher to Learner Self-directed learning toward communicative competence .To answer to this question, the study has applied qualitative research grounded classroom observation, focused groups interviews, and learners' self-directed tasks based learning exercises, video-filming tasks performance and learning theories criticism. As a result, this pilot study has found that developing learning autonomy in English language teaching and learning not only improves significantly learner's self-governance, but also self-improvement toward communicative language competence. Therefore, to promote language learning climate, teachers are recommended to provide variety of communicative language activities to promote independently learners own learning.

Keywords: learner, autonomy, critical study, ELT, curriculum, development

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1. Introduction

Learners' autonomy in Teaching and Learning in 21st centuries is built around a debate of methodology and application when a critic is requested to evaluate English Language Teaching and Learning curriculum. The idea of autonomy is fundamental to liberal philosophies which see the central goal of self-improvement as the development of independent minds and hence the capacity for independent action. The Latter traces back its origin in ancient Greek philosophy in the idea of self-mastery and determination for both Plato and Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics (1166a 17-19). Despite number of researches which has been conducted in the field of teaching and learning with different oriented paradigms, autonomy is a debatable subject when a critic scholar involves in its methodology and application for English language classroom learning. Since little is still known about in ELT DRC- curriculum development. Indeed, students spend 11 years learning English from secondary to university but unable to communicate effectively in English. So, teachers accuse learners of inability to perform communicative language skills while dissatisfactions and failures in learning are due to one single method or lack of method which have contributed to constant critique of methods and demand for new reform and emphasis (Stern & Tarone, 1983).

The present paper has raised the question of how to improve Teaching and Learning Curriculum from Teacher to Learner Self-directed learning, how learning improves learner's autonomy toward communicative competence outcome. To answer to these questions, this work has grounded qualitative research through classroom observation, group focused interviews, self-directed group focused learning videos analysis, and learning theories criticism. As the result, learners' autonomy as a self-directed learning through based well-planned engaged exercise activities by the teacher was still ignored in classroom learning while the latter increases significantly learners' self-esteem communicative skills competence and improves learning outcome. Hence, the teacher in ELT DRC context has to facilitate learning through based supported blended activities with more language tasks-based learning that give learners opportunities to self-direct, Self-govern and promote their learning.

2. Discussion

Following the investigation along with the axes below in Fig 1 and 2, leads an ELT Teacher, scholar or a critic to get involved in the following questions and issues:

- How does teaching influence on learner's autonomy?
- How do foreign students use English in and out of classroom?
- How learner's autonomy finds reliable application in ELT
- How does autonomy improve learner's communicative competence skills?
- How does autonomy vector connect with learner's critical thinking?
- How does autonomy resolve learners' passive learning?
- How does autonomy influence learner's decision -making and problem -solving?

Dealing with the questions above, two or more alternative answers are possible. First, Learner's autonomy and classroom function as a kind of boarder social order's relationship to the outside world and observed as part of the world both affected by what happen within it. Hence, autonomous learners need to be able to decide on their own learning strategies, organize their learning tasks and self-govern, monitor and evaluate their learning results. Next, autonomous learners are those ones who take active roles in governing learning tasks and self-evaluate their learning results based on tasks well-planned activities by the teacher.

Second, autonomy in learning and ELT teaching plays a pivotal role for language acquisition and learning development. Since, learner's autonomy of critical thinking and communicative competence enable the learning to be more creative, participative and generative.

Third, autonomy in learning affects communicative competence when a learner is capable to face a situational problem and handle decision-making style on his /her own learning. Moreover, learners are autonomous to take responsibility for their own learning and development. By own ship of the process of learning, the learner has the choice in regard to the structure of learning and content or materials (Ben and Voller 2014, 1985; Dickson, 1985). Moreover, autonomy in learning requires the learner to develop control over his or her own learning and her own role in practice process. Next, learning autonomy development requires a learning structure in which the learner has *"the possibility of exercising his/her ability to impact changes in his or her learning outcomes"* (Holec, 1985). Indeed, most English Language Learners students are afraid to communicate in front of the lecturer or their peers in classroom context, this is due to observed multifaceted and deep rooted problems of lack of autonomy, self-governance and cognitive skills development in learning to enhance the learner' communicative skills competence (Middleton, 2009).

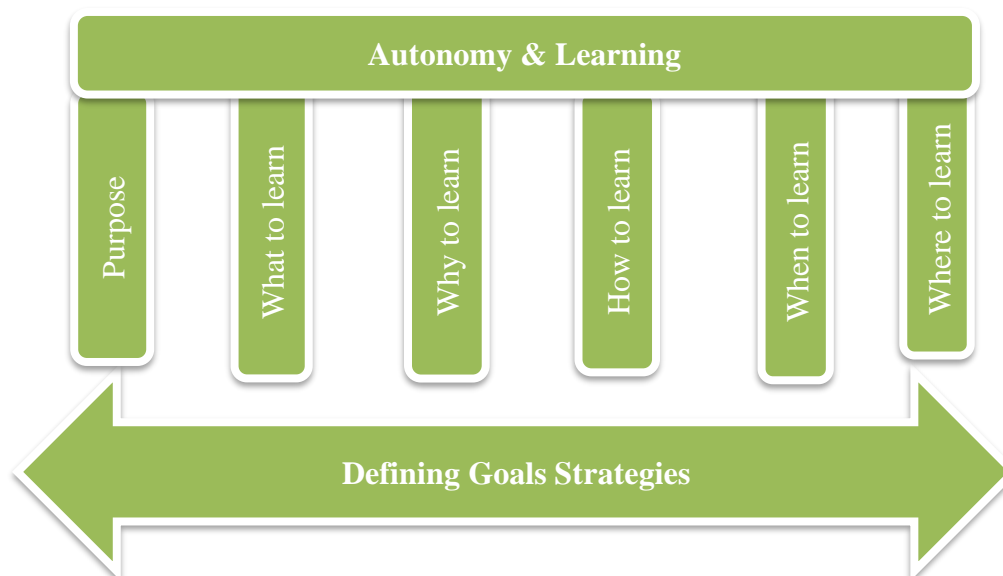


Figure 1: Autonomy and learning goals as research paradigm in EFL (Classroom)

Thus, ELT /EAP teacher should predict learning in terms of outcomes and create a safe environment where failure is a just an opportunity to try again and improve. Furthermore, creating a learning culture where multiple solutions are possible leads to a step toward student centered learning approach to teaching which provide substantial learning and tasks based supported autonomous constructive communicative competence learning process through varied learning tasks such as, blended learning, tasks-based learning to promote learner's autonomy and then make them more participative in EFL.

Considering the investigation along with the above axes in Fig 1A leads a Critic English Language researcher and Scholars to involve in questions and issues about clusters of learner's autonomy, context and its audience in categories. The formal features of learner's autonomy on the investigation to be carried out are based on the interactions between any of the two clusters of learning autonomy and communicative competence skills. The above clusters in the field of language teaching and learning research require a paradigm shift to empirical investigation. This also implies the use of learner's autonomy as innovative approach to language teaching and learning. The latter exhibits features that distinguish them from other different approaches to language teaching and learning such as Lecturing methods. Moreover, when we accept the legitimacy and the ability of autonomy as pedagogical goal, we must necessarily turn on attention to choices in teacher-learner relationship. This partially determines the quality of life-learning in education as well as the relationship between life in school and the wider social context of learner autonomy. In fact, autonomy implies a change in pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners and a modification of the representation the learners have of themselves as learners (Hurd, 2006, La Ganza, pp.63-79, Mozzon-Mc & Pherson, 2007). From this view point, learner's autonomy should reflect the way students perceive their capacities as learners and may be connected to self-efficacy while learner's self-directed learning in language learning is observed as a developing capacity on the part of the learners to accept responsibility for their own learning. Thus, teachers who aim to promote a learner-directed learning environment encourage the learners to reflect on their own learning by engaging them to understand the process of learning and language function and adopt patterns of learning in which they themselves take initiatives and feel in control of their progress.

Firstly, exploring the axes above for which purpose should the student learn, the learners must be prepared to engage on tasks that lead them toward critical thinking to formulate their motivation for learning. Moreover, personal learning goals are the behaviors knowledge or understandings that students identify as important to their own learning that is related to general work habits, specific subjects, domains of learning, or a combination of these. Investigating on what are personal learning goals and why, students are expected to struggle with tasks and provide surface level answers. Additionally, Autonomous learning should engage the learners not to avoid the process. Hence, everyone has to define a decision for learning on a particular subject. This develops student's freedom and autonomous learning goals pursuing. Consequently, it

allows students to define pain of feeling and the desire to bring changes through learning and take strong action to get there and achieve successfully communicative competence skills. The latter leads to understand the learners' perception of his own and how he is thinking to change his life and what he/she would like to become through learning. Furthermore, it inspires the learners to set goals for his or learning and determines what kind of person he /she would like to become through or after his learning (Hawley & Pifel & Jordan, 2012).

As in sight on what to learn, the student should be aware of the content delivery subject to allow them to decide on their learning. From this viewpoint, the learner has a freedom choice to plan and self-direct his or her learning. The learner has a freedom to place a choice on the most useful skill to successfully learn and achieve.

Exploring the why to learn, the teacher guides the learner into a critical thinking struggle to self-discovery toward a subject learning. At this level, the learner engages to generate new thoughts. Indeed, learners have to do with the way they perceive their capacities as learners and may be connected to self-efficacy (Portine, 1998).

Exploring how should a student learn, teachers who aim to promote a learner-directed

Learning environment encourage them to reflect on their own learning and understanding the process of learning and the function of language and adopt patterns of learning in which students themselves take initiatives and feel in control of their own progress. At this level, setting goals, planning learning activities, self-evaluation of learning, choosing learning activities are recommended (Dam, 2003). A larger autonomy of learner needs to be understood at this level as a key element of larger ecological system rather than an entity of its own. The evidence shows that the key concepts of agency, identity, affordances, and metacognition are intertwined and work in synergy within a larger system to allow the emergency of learner autonomy. Student who exercise some measures of control over how, when, and in what manner they encounter second language tutorial materials more engaged and thereby more likely to do well in these classes through communicative competence skills (Coleman, 2010). Thus, in contemporary education, the principle of learner autonomy in English language learning on how to learn has been enshrined through a well-organized repeated tasks based practices either in listening, speaking, reading, or writing etc in which students take charge of governance and control over their exercises through a substantial amount of autonomy over their learning. Moreover, language instruction has also to be considered in the area of student autonomy, as numerous computer English learning programs, task based learning repeated exercises that make learning autonomy possible for students of a second language to exert more control over the nature of their learning experiences. In practice the use of autonomy is based on instruction in well-structured language learning setting activities that could be the result in higher levels of motivation and academic proficiency. Next, motivation is the paramount for a learner to denote the strength of a person's desire to achieve a goal (Deci, and Ryan, 2010). Thus, autonomy-based instruction on how, when and where to learn is the development of learners' abilities to work more effectively in a self-directed governance fashion. Little advocates that the

ability of learners' autonomy-based interventions improve both motivation and academic performance to rich a particular goal achievement. So, autonomy encompasses with learner's affective, behavioral and cognitive response and each is related to factors such as engagement, arousal, self-efficacy and expectancy of a learner and how the choice and decision-making on learning environment may affect his /her cognitive skill levels development.

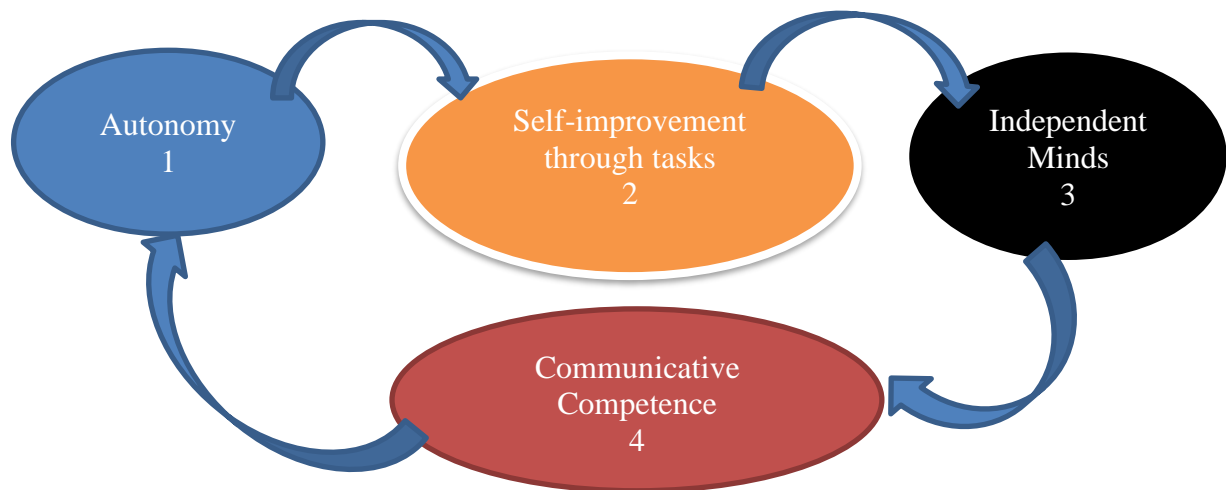


Figure 2: Autonomy as the reflection of task-based learning

Investigating on issues of autonomy in the axes above in B to improve learning classroom leads a critic scholar to agree that autonomy implies learner's ability or capacity to be in charge or take control of their learning in order to achieve communicative competence. Moreover, autonomous learners are viewed as active agents whose learning depends on their ability and willingness "to make and carry out the choices which govern their actions" (Littlewood, 1996, pg. 428). Indeed, different alternatives are possible to assist learners autonomously in their communicative competence such as computer assisted language learning. Since technology offers plenty opportunities for learners to interact through audio-text, and video-based communicative channels. Next, learners' choices to interact with player or non-play characters and objects in the environment influence on accuracy and complexity of language production in their independent way. Thus, tasks can facilitate them, but also require mediation with the environment. Ellis (2003) defines a task as a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome in a context and communicate meaning using their own language resources. Then, learners make both linguistic choices to interact by making their input more comprehensible through the modification and the negotiation of meaning (Pica, & Falodum, 1993, p.19). So, communicative competence tasks mediate the learners' autonomy as they are compelled to control their own learning through problem-solving, decision-making and opinion exchange. Hence, tasks help learners to continue learning English as life-long skill. Indeed, Effective Cognitive level tasks encourage active participation, interaction and collaboration among L2 Learners

(Hampel, 2010). Next, tasks boosting learners' autonomy enable learners significantly to pay attention to both meaning (idea) and form (grammar), which raises language awareness and further enhances the development of interlanguage in both asynchronous and synchronous manner (Lee, 2016). Moreover, critical thinking tasks type autonomously affect learners thinking interaction and hence negotiate meaning as well as their language production (Yilmaz et al., 2011) e.g. Independent Information exchange activities enhance learners' understanding of grammar points through experts scaffolding. Furthermore, learners autonomously benefit from linguistic scaffolding and further improve their accuracy. Indeed, tasks promote learners' motivation and interactive engagement, the challenge of multimodality, language proficiency levels, and technical difficulties. Besides classroom, learning, students can complete tasks independently off campus and self-direct their own learning and decisions-making to perform tasks and plan themselves how to actively participate in the feedback with their peers. Moreover, students may be exposed to varied tasks such as, online self-access support using class wiki site, TED Talks, YouTube, video, audio-text, computer assisting technology and other well-tailored blended learning exercises related to academic tasks to boost their own autonomy and then promote their communicative competence based learning.

Figure 3: Autonomy & metacognitive function relationship in classroom learning

Metacognitive Level	Characteristics
Behavioral Autonomy	Learner's progression from dependence to self-care and self-direction through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choice-making, • decision-making, • adequacy of various solution, • problem-situation and solution-making, • problem-solving, • goals-development, • independence and risk-taking, • task-performance.
Self-Regulated Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning-decisions, • goals-setting and action-performance, acting, evaluating, revising plan, • self-observation and evaluation, skills reinforcement, accessing, observing, recording and self-discovery, • self-instruction, self-talk to provide prompts for problem-solving, • self-advocacy, speak up to defend oneself, a cause or a person.
Psychological Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • processing an internal locus of control, • self-efficacy, outcome expectations and belief that one has to control oneself over critical outcome, • positive thinking, and attribution of efficacy.
Self-Concept and Academic Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • processing accurate knowledge of individual strength and needs, ability to act in a manner that capitalizes on knowledge, ability to apply personal insights to the real world.

Thus, open-ended questions may be used to allow students to reflect creatively upon. Boosting learners' autonomy in ELT requires the understanding of usefulness of practical

tasks and effectiveness of learner's scaffolding in relationship with his autonomous learning. So, open-ended critical thinking questions allows students to freely express their viewpoints using their own retrospective method (Cohen, Manion, 2013).



Figure 4: Autonomy as linguistic feature research paradigm

Going through the investigation along with the axes above 3&4 leads a critic or ELT scholar to understand that behavioral autonomy refers to the ability to make decisions independently and follow through on these decisions with actions. Furthermore, a developmental perspective on behavioral autonomy involve a desire of the learner for autonomy and the degree of communicative language achievement. Moreover, behavioral autonomy in the learner depicts higher abilities for social integration and reinforces the learner the ability to participate in larger number peer and adult oriented activities (Greenberger, 1984).

Instead, Self-regulated learning behavior refers to self-generated thoughts, feelings and behaviors that the learner orient to attaining goals. Students who are very conscious of their ability and their weakness are active in their efforts to study. In addition, students can effectively monitor their learning behavior setting up goals in a process of learning to increase their effectiveness. Thus, the process of self-regulation can enhance self-satisfaction, motivation and then students are more likely to succeed academically. In addition, that, firstly, self-regulated learning includes students' metacognitive strategies for planning, monitoring and modifying their cognition which refers to the awareness and control of thought processes.

Secondly, students' management of their academic task efforts has been proposed as another important component. Thirdly, the students have the actual cognitive strategies that they use to learn the actual material. These skills should play role in general learning circumstances in which learners actively participate in the learning process. In this way learners are proposed a general time-order sequence that students

follow as they fulfill a task. Furthermore, a general conceptual framework of self-regulated learning brings together different cognitive, motivational, emotional and contextual concepts while learner's autonomy and self-regulated learning are closely related to the motivational components, self-efficacy and intrinsic value (Pintrich, and Gracia, 2012; Peng, 2012). Next, psychological empowerment implies that the learners are required to transform themselves to be ready to change and adapt. The learning industry presents strong appeal to reformation in which the most important assets of the organization are smart and knowledgeable that lead the students to a sustainable competitive advantage of creating modern organizational process. Thus, learners' self-empowerment is closely related to their perception about themselves in relation to their learning environment. Besides, the environment surrounding individuals is important for increasing psychological empowerment because the latter is not consistent or enduring personality trait, but rather a set of cognitions shaped by work environments (Thomas, and Veltouse, 1990). Thus, learner's psychological empowerment is possible when a great deal of effort is made to increase his self-concept psychological development by focusing both on empowerment and management. Learners empowering conditions give opportunities for decision autonomy, governance, challenge, and responsibility that make learners appreciate what they are learning. In turn, such appreciation results in feeling of meaningfulness, competence, self-determination and impact (Simons, Vander Linden). Consequently, they are likely to reciprocate by being more committed to their learning (Avolio & Gardner, 2004; Eisenberger & Fasolo, 1990). Psychological Self-empowerment mechanism is understood as a management tool which operates on number of self-management learning process. Moreover, a multidimensional concept of empowerment has been considered by expert as an experienced psychological manners and cognition which focuses on personal experience (Thomas et al., 1990). In fact, teachers should structure learners' tasks-based learning which develop learners critical thinking to act independently on their own learning with feelings that can be summarized in meaning, competency, impact and self-determination.

Furthermore, Self-Concept and achievement are substantially correlated in the sense that self-concept influences on academic achievement and vice-versa through self-esteem and self-evaluation where by one can stimulate or drive off the achievement process. Next, autonomous learning should promote learner's self-governance, self-esteem and self-evaluation towards academic achievement. Indeed, self-concept is identified sometimes through various self-understanding as self-schema and Self-Representation (Cross et al., 1994; Lewicki, P., 1984), Self-Image (Offer et al., 1972, Self-Perception (Evans et al., 2015), Self-Esteem, (Rosenberg, 1965), Self-Evaluation etc. which in return requires strong improvement through self-positive thinking behavior and self-determination to meet academic achievement.

Figure 5: Autonomy and Supportive Learning

I	Learners produce the most creative work when they focus on complex, challenging tasks and self-supervisory tasks in their own supportive controlling way
II	Self-Supportive Learning demonstrate the concern of learners' feeling and needs which encourage them to voice their own concerns in group or pair work to provide proactive and mainly informative feedback through practice.
III	Tasks based learning consists of individual, pair work or group learning to help students to take initiatives, make choices, and solve-situational problems relevant to their own learning subject.
IV	Learners Self-Assessment through varied repeated tasks promotes them to see themselves as individuals who are willing to succeed through failure and try-again and how they can be perceived by their peers.
V	Learners' Feedback is advocated as self-monitoring learning and inquiring about performance

Exploring the axes above leads a critic researcher of English to involve into questions how supportive learning autonomy features influence English Communicative language competence learning outcome? To answer to this question, supportive learning autonomy clusters promote learners' motivation when they are able to drive the feedback which includes: 1. The desire for learning and feedback resulting from the need to reduce uncertainty and protect one's ego-esteem and desire to make positive impression to others. From our classroom teaching and learning experience to test learners' independent learning experiments through well-structured tasks based learning for Bac5 Agricultural Engineering learners at UEA and Bac5 Law students at UCB involved in learning English for Academic purpose, the observable qualitative results have shown that classroom-based approaches fostering autonomy provided the learners the opportunities to make decisions concerning their own learning tasks through individual, pair work and group work that in return, gained positive result on accounts of experiments through learners communicative competence feedback in which they have been encouraged to take actions with a certain amount of control over planning and assessing learning classroom from feedback students topics presentation. Then, developing learners' autonomy within classroom requires collaboration ship between teachers and learners through based-learning tasks support and feedback (Benson, 2013). Thus, the axes above describe why the autonomous learner will absorb, process, and retain knowledge independently during their self-directed learning. The autonomous role played by the learners affect their behavior, cognition, and constructivism belief of learner's ability to learn and the desire to reach a certain academic goal achievement.

Exploring the table below leads a critic language teacher or a researcher to understand that English Language classroom experience should provide learning opportunities where students act autonomously, take control and responsibility for their own learning, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it. Thus, better classroom learning environment should reflect the ideas that students are capable of self-directing and able to develop an independent proactive approach to their studies toward decision-making and problem-solving.

Figure 6: Constructive Autonomous Learning Cognitive Values

1	Mind: the mind of the learner is in the head, hence his/her learning autonomy should focus on active cognitive reorganization.
2	Raw Materials: learning autonomy should use raw or primarily data sources, manipulative and interactive materials.
3	Student autonomy: promoting student's personal theory, critical thinking, decision-making and problem solving allows student to think and learn responsibly to foster own ship-decision making.
4	Arousal of Personal Motivation and Meaningfulness: learning autonomy should reflect meaningful and relevant behavior relating learning to practice and personal experience. Adapt content based on student responses to capitalize on personal interest and motivation.
5	Cognitive Framing: autonomous learning should meet organized information around concepts, problems, themes, and interrelationship while framing activities using thinking terminology such as: Classify, summarize, predict etc. Prioritize knowledge and misconceptions, adapt cognitive demands of instructional tasks to learner's cognitive schemes while building on prior knowledge. Design activities to address student's misconceptions by posing for example contradictions to original hypothesis and then inviting responses.
6	Questioning: promoting students' inquiry and conjunctive with open-ended questions. Also, encourage students' question, asking behavior and peer questioning (individual exploring)
7	Generating Connections: providing time for the selection of instructional materials and discovery of information, ideas, and relationship, also encouraging students to generate knowledge connections, metaphors, personal insight, and build their own learning product.
8	Self-Regulated Learning: foster opportunity for reflection on skills used to manage and control one's learning from. Help student understand and become self-aware of all aspects of one's learning from planning to learning performance evaluation. Give the focus on individual mental activity, the importance of cooperative learning, or peer interaction is in the modeling of and support for new individual metacognitive skill.
9	Assessment: focus of assessment on individual cognitive development within predefined stages. Use the authentic portfolio and performance-based measures with higher order thinking skill evaluation criteria or scoring rubrics.

3. Conclusion

The present work has dealt with clusters of learner's autonomy as a critical study for improving Classroom Language Teaching and Learning Culture in DRC Curriculum context. Indeed, teachers still dominate classroom English Language Teaching while learners are viewed to be passive consumers. However, teacher centered teaching approach disables students' cognitive values to independently decide, engage, self-govern, self-direct and develop their own learning through well planned learning activities. Since, such total dependent learning isolates and ignores learners' self-concept. Consequently, learners spend 11 years at both secondary school and university in English classroom learning, but end up brain washed with communicative language competence disabilities. To resolve this problem, the present paper has raised the question of how autonomy improves learners' communicative competence outcomes. To answer to this question, the study has applied qualitative research grounded classroom observation, focused groups interviews, learners' tasks-based learning exercises video filming and feedback analysis and also learning theories criticism. As a result, developing learning

autonomy in English language teaching and learning has been found as a prior response with significance improvement on learner's communicative language competence and confidence. In doing so, teachers may design English Course Learning that promotes students cognitive step levels to the next independent or autonomous learning which should be more comprehensible, applicable, analytical, synthetically, creative and evaluable and that engages learners to self-direct, make decisions to meet situational problem-solving. Then, creating language learning culture that promotes learner's autonomy requires a substantial learning constructive communicative competence through varied tasks to promote learner's autonomy and then make them more participative and creative. Therefore, there is still enough through investigation on learner autonomy to meet academic excellence goals either qualitatively or quantitatively as research paradigm in DRC ELT Educational Context.

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