



P-ISSN 2355-2794
E-ISSN 2461-0275

Learner Autonomy: Moroccan EFL University Students' Beliefs and Readiness

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has attracted considerable scholarly attention in language learning. Research on this concept is abundant and continues to flourish. However, to date, scant attention has been paid to researching autonomy in the Moroccan context. Thus, the present mixed-methods study aimed to partially bridge the gap by investigating university EFL students' beliefs and their perceived readiness level of autonomy. For this purpose, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to collect data. Questionnaires were administered (n=245), and interviews were conducted with selected participants (n=16). An autonomy scale consisting of five parameters (planning and goal-setting, learners' expected teacher roles, learners' beliefs and affect management, learners' social behaviors, and learners' self-assessment and learning strategies) was used to elicit and analyze data. The items that made up the learner autonomy scale were adopted and modified from different influentially existing scales. Three main themes were generated and analyzed in the qualitative strand following thematic analysis procedures. The results demonstrate that most students held positive beliefs towards autonomy and appeared ready to embrace it in their learning journey. Students exhibited a strong inclination towards using English outside the classroom (89.8%), displaying a willingness to take responsibility for their learning (85.3%), and setting learning goals (82%). The qualitative results highlight some aspects, such as participating in content creation within lessons and effectively managing their time. In light of these findings, this study

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Citation in APA style: Oussou, S., Kerouad, S., & Hdii, S. (2024). Learner autonomy: Moroccan EFL university students' beliefs and readiness. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 11(1), 116-132.

Received January 1, 2023; Revised April 19, 2023; Accepted November 21, 2023; Published Online January 31, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v11i1.30007>

suggests pedagogical implications for EFL teachers to enhance learner autonomy in their classrooms as well as a set of recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Assessing autonomy, autonomy dimensions, beliefs, EFL students, learner autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

A growing interest in researching autonomy has been observed in recent decades. Since its first emergence into the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the 1980s, efforts have been made by scholars to conceptualize the concept (Benson, 2011; Little, 2007; Sinclair, 2008). Little (2007) described it as an educational goal that is “cross-culturally valid” (Smith, 2008, p. 396). It is needed in students’ language learning (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Lien, 2022; Pawlak, 2017; Yusnimar, 2019). Five core areas have been the research focus in the last two decades. These include the nature and origins of autonomy (Benson, 2011; Little, 2007), the promotion of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Cotterall, 2000), pedagogy for learner autonomy (Jiménez Raya & Vázquez, 2022), the relationship between learner autonomy and target language proficiency (Dafei, 2007; Little, 2007; Sakai & Takagi, 2009), and measuring students’ readiness for autonomy (Alrabia, 2017; Chan, 2010; Saeed, 2021).

This proliferation of research has yielded evidence that autonomous learners appear to be successful language learners (Daflizar et al., 2022; Soruç et al., 2017). Learner autonomy has been advocated because it fulfills one of the prerequisites of student-centered learning (Al-Khresheh, 2022). In this context, learner autonomy is understood as an aim that needs to be achieved so that learners will manage their own learning and pursue learning for life. As ELT has changed in theory and practice, education in Morocco has recently witnessed some reforms and changes, the latest being the Framework Law 51-17, which appeared in 2019 (The Ministry of Education, 2019). This law encourages learner autonomy, considering it as the ultimate goal of education since it develops life-long learners who will be able to sustain learning beyond the walls of the classroom. The present study follows the trend of research that focuses on EFL learners’ autonomy, but in a different context where much still needs to be done to get insights into how learners perceive and exercise autonomy in their learning.

Indeed, students at the university level should become autonomous learners because, at this phase, they have become learners who ought to be characterized by initiating and self-directing their own learning (Kermani & Hashamdar, 2017; Merriam, 2018; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). It has been proven that language learning occurs when learners are involved in the teaching-learning process, when engaged in the negotiation of classroom activities that respond to their needs, and when encouraged to learn as a community (Richards, 2006). In essence, they should be able to formulate their learning goals, identify learning materials, use learning strategies, and eventually assess their learning (Knowles et al., 2015). In this regard, learner autonomy should be encouraged because it is “both a pre-condition of self-efficacy and higher achievements in learning and an essential learning outcome” (Raitskaya et

al., 2021, p. 213). In other words, assuming a degree of autonomy plays a key role in students' learning experiences and, hence, in achieving better learning outcomes.

The concept of autonomy in the Moroccan context has been the subject of extensive research. As [Bagci and Aydin \(2021\)](#) observed, research focusing on autonomy has been more prevalent in Western than Eastern societies. Therefore, the readiness of Moroccan EFL learners to take control of their own learning has remained significantly under-researched, creating a gap that the present study aims to address partially. Another gap that the present study sought to bridge relates to the national educational reforms, which have not been adequately reflected in empirical research. This has rendered attempts to promote autonomy among students somewhat superficial in practice. This is because a model of autonomy that works in a particular educational context may not necessarily apply to another. The present study believes that initiating the design of a local model with the voices of students is a pivotal step in addressing this issue. Essentially, the paper investigates whether students are prepared to be autonomous in their learning and the extent to which they exhibit autonomous beliefs and practices. The study addresses two primary questions:

1. To what extent do Moroccan EFL learners perceive themselves as autonomous language learners?
2. How do these learners perceive and exercise autonomy?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last few decades, autonomy has become a well-established construct. Indeed, much headway has been made in this concern and continues to be made as publications have recently been on the rise in an increasingly academic manner ([Benson & Lamb, 2021](#); [Han & Reinhardt, 2022](#); [Raitskaya et al., 2021](#); [Reinders, 2021](#)). The field is, therefore, "reaching a stage of maturity" ([Chong & Reinders, 2022](#), p. 1).

2.1 The Concept of Autonomy

Defining autonomy has been a primary focus of much research among scholars. Being "a construct of constructs, entailing various dimensions and components" ([Tassinari, 2012, p. 28](#)), autonomy appears to be a challenging concept to define. The foundational definition of the concept was provided by [Holec \(1981\)](#), who defined it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), which entails the ability to determine one's goals, to choose the content to be learned and how it should be learned, and to engage in self-assessment. While [Little \(1991\)](#) considered [Holec's](#) account of autonomy as "the universally accepted definition" (p. 14), there has been an emphasis on some aspects related to autonomy over others. For example, whereas [Holec's \(1981\)](#) definition stresses the ability to learn independently from others, [Little \(1991\)](#) put more emphasis on the psychological aspect of the learner's capacity to make decisions about both the content and process of their learning. At another end of the spectrum, [Cotterall \(1999\)](#) conceptualized autonomy in terms of the learners' ability to use learning tactics, a point that is consistent with the statement that autonomous language learning involves, among other things, the use of learning strategies

(Griffiths, 2015; Rubin, 2005). Meanwhile, Benson (2011) deemed the concept as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (p. 58).

Thus, two notions stood out in Benson’s definition: capacity and control. The former is defined as “what a person has the potential to do, rather than what they actually do” (Huang & Benson, 2013, p. 9). The term capacity denotes the potential that an individual possesses within them rather than a set of instances of learning behaviors, while control indicates “the power to make choices and act on them” (p. 9). Although this may indicate that what and how to learn are decided by the learner, learners may actually choose to purposively depend on the teacher when they consider that necessary and more appropriate at an occasion (Reinders & Benson, 2021). All in all, the definitions above imply that autonomy is a capacity or ability that is developed and that implies assuming responsibility for and control over one’s own learning, where ‘control’ is “a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves” (Little, 2007, p. 14). Therefore, this capacity can be achieved if learners are able to decide on their own learning, choose and identify learning materials, use effective learning strategies, and constantly assess their own learning.

A growing body of research on learner autonomy identified several aspects that determine the learning behaviors of autonomous learners (Chan et al., 2010; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Macaskill & Taylor, 2010; Phan, 2021; Ruelens, 2019; Shen et al., 2020). One of these characteristics is the learning beliefs that students bring to the classroom (Cotterall, 1999). They are factors that may either enhance or hinder the development of their potential for exercising autonomy, depending on the kind of beliefs learners hold (Chan et al., 2010; Tassinari, 2012). Learner beliefs may influence how learners approach language learning (Dang, 2012), and they eventually affect learners’ autonomy readiness (Saeed, 2021). Another aspect that plays a role in autonomous learning is self-assessment (Phan, 2021; Ruelens, 2019; Shen et al., 2020). The ability of students to self-assess their learning progress is key to developing their autonomy (Benson & Lamb, 2021; Phan, 2021). Also, learners’ use of planning and learning strategies is another determinant of autonomous learners (Knowles et al., 2015; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Phan, 2021; Ruelens, 2019; Shen et al., 2020). The variety of the aspects discussed here suggests that learner autonomy is indeed a complex construct, and its measurement must reflect these aspects.

2.2 Assessing Learner Autonomy

Assessing learner autonomy has been problematic based on the related literature. Nunan (1997) pointed to the difficulty in trying to measure autonomy, which is essentially a matter of degrees and “not an all-or-nothing concept” (p. 192). In other words, while there is some evidence of students’ observable behaviors manifesting some characteristics of autonomy, it is, in the first place, “not a single, easily described behavior” (Little, 1991, p. 7). However, according to Benson (2011), this does not mean that one cannot try to measure it. He continues that there should be a possibility for a measuring scale allowing for judging how successful the process is if the aim is to promote autonomous learning.

Therefore, Benson (2011) viewed that the construct of autonomy can, in principle, be measured. However, the environment in which it is present or assumed to take place should be considered to reflect the learners’ characteristics (Lin & Reinders, 2017). Ho and Croockall (1995) thought the issue of context as central to the

discussion on an assessment by emphasizing that “the culturally constructed nature of the classroom setting” (i.e., learners’ and teachers’ expected roles) “needs to be taken into account” (p. 237). Moreover, since it is contextually variable (Benson, 2011), the assessment of autonomy is influenced by the constraints and affordances that are particular to an educational context. This means that there should be an alignment between the measuring tool and the setting where it is developed. Taking all the above considerations into account, the scale items of the present study’s instrument are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Learner autonomy dimensions.

No.	Dimensions of learner autonomy	Cited sources
1.	Planning and goal-setting.	Knowles et al. (2015), Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021)
2.	Learners’ expected roles of the teacher.	Cotterall (1999)
3.	Learners’ beliefs, affect, and self-management.	Chan et al. (2010), Cotterall (1999), Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021), Macaskill & Taylor (2010), Tassinari (2012)
4.	Social and other behaviors.	Chan et al. (2010), Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021)
5.	Learners’ self-assessment and learning strategies.	Phan (2021), Ruelens (2019), Shen et al. (2020)

3. METHODS

3.1 Context and Participants

A sample of 245 EFL students from the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco, were non-randomly selected. In terms of the participants’ gender, there were 105 males and 140 females. They were divided into three age groups: 19-22 years old, 23-25 years old, and 26 years old or above. All participants were majoring in English and were second- and third-year students.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

This study used the questionnaire and interview, adhering to the quantitative and qualitative approaches. It is viewed that the mixed methods approach, allowing for ample data from various data collection tools, is in a position to address the research problem more thoroughly. The approach is more practical in the sense that it encourages the researchers to use all the tools at their disposal to better deal with a problem (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In fact, in his discussion of the research methods in applied linguistics, Dörnyei (2007) encouraged the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods as each describes a “reality in a different, yet complementary, way” (p. 44). In the present study, learner autonomy is a complex construct that requires using various tools to thoroughly elicit students’ views and assess their readiness for autonomous learning. Also, in an attempt to assess learners’ readiness for autonomy, Murase (2015) recommended using both quantitative and qualitative tools.

The questionnaire was first piloted with a group of students whose characteristics were similar to the actual intended sample, following the guidelines set by [Bryman \(2012\)](#). Once the final version had been established, participants were asked to indicate their perceived degree of autonomy on a five-point Likert scale, where “Strongly disagree” = 1, “Disagree” = 2, “Neutral” = 3, “Agree” = 4, and “Strongly agree” = 5. Specifically, to answer the first research question, five learner autonomy sub-scales that can measure the construct were identified (see Table 1). Consequently, the presentation of results and their description followed these parameters. To ensure that the questionnaire accurately represented the concept of autonomy, its items were all validated following the specialized literature on the concept. Also, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha, a commonly used statistical test ([Loewen & Plonsky, 2016](#)). It was found that the internal consistency was 0.80 on the learner autonomy scale, which is a highly accepted level.

Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was deployed to seek more insights on some aspects of autonomy to answer the second research question. This type of interview involved using a pre-determined set of questions that the respondents were asked to ascertain how they perceived and exercised autonomy in their learning. Generally, the interviewing technique seeks to probe into the participant’s detailed subjective perspectives about an issue ([Creswell, 2014](#)). It allows for documenting “how things are experienced, with respect to the phenomenon under investigation” ([Leavy, 2017, p. 5](#)). Unlike in a quantitative study, the sample size for a qualitative study is usually determined by the concept of saturation ([Boddy, 2016](#)), for it is challenging to predetermine the exact sample size ([Denscombe, 2010](#)). Following these arguments, 16 students were selected for an interview in the present study. The participants were asked questions seeking more subjective views about autonomy. Concerning the ethical issues, all the participants, both at the stage of responding to the questionnaires and the interviews, were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that their views would be used for research purposes only.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 23. Scale item analysis for learner autonomy was carried out. The analysis was mainly descriptive in accordance with the first research question, which inquired about their perceived level of autonomy.

Three main themes were generated following the transcription and the coding process to answer the second research question. Thus, thematic analysis was applied to ascertain the beliefs of the students regarding how they perceive their ability and readiness for autonomy. Given that the qualitative strand adheres to the assumptions of constructivism, multiple perspectives that exist in the world ought to be valued ([Creswell, 2014](#)). Likewise, the qualitative data of this study is an example of those different views that need to be made sense of, the interpretation of which is only one of several ‘right ways’ ([Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 32](#)). As such, one of the suggested ways to support the interpretation of the participants’ responses was to cite examples of text data. In this way, other researchers can understand how the present data was analyzed, which adds to the analysis’s transparency and credibility, two important tenets of trustworthiness.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Analysis of the Quantitative Findings

This section presents the main results of the current study. This is done by including tables displaying the percentages of each response to understand the extent to which the participants are ready to assume autonomy in their learning. The first item concerns the learners' engagement in planning and goal-setting.

Table 2. Students' engagement in planning and goal-setting.

No.	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
1.	I set achievable goals in learning English.	.4	5.7	11.8	52.7	29.4
2.	I make study plans that match my goals in learning English.	2.4	9.4	15.1	46.9	26.1
3.	I revise my English study plans if they do not work well.	4.5	13.1	17.6	41.6	23.3

Note. (SD) = strongly disagree, (D) = disagree, (N) = neutral, (A) = agree, and (SA) = strongly agree.

With regard to the first statement, the majority of the participants agreed (52.7%) or strongly agreed (29.4%) that they set achievable goals in learning English. In contrast, only a small number of the participants disagreed. Concerning statement 2, more than half of the participants agreed (46.9%) or strongly agreed (26.1%). As for statement 3, two-thirds of the respondents agreed (41.6%) or strongly agreed (23.3%) that they revised their English study plans if they do not work well, while nearly a quarter of them (17.6%) remained uncertain. Table 3 presents the results about the students' perceived teacher roles.

Table 3. Students' perceived roles of the teacher.

No.	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
4.	*I like the teacher to tell me what to do.	35.1	37.1	13.9	10.2	3.7
5.	*I like the teacher to tell me what my difficulties are.	5.8	31.8	4.1	5.3	.8
6.	I like the teacher to be more of a facilitator.	.4	8.2	15.5	42	33.9
7.	I can learn without the direct support of the teacher.	10.2	24.5	14.7	34.7	15.9
8.	If given the opportunity, I would like to negotiate which activities to do in class.	1.2	12.7	18.8	41.2	26.1
9.	*I feel worried about learning on my own as I need a teacher to tell me if I am doing well.	22.4	36.3	10.2	21.6	9.4

It is worth noting that the items to which an asterisk is attached indicate their contradiction with the measured construct. Therefore, in response to item 4, the results demonstrated that many participants disagreed (37.1%) or strongly disagreed (35.1%). However, very few of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, a result which is similar to item 5, indicating that the participants could do the reverse because the items were reverse coded, which is also the case for the ninth item, whose results are similar to the previous ones. Concerning item 6, more than two-thirds of the participants agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (33.9%). Moreover, in response to item 7, half of the participants agreed (34.7%) or strongly agreed (15.9%) that they could

learn without the direct support of the teacher. However, the other half expressed their disagreement and remained neutral.

Regarding item 8, more than half of the participants agreed (41.2%) or strongly agreed (26.1%), and an insignificant number disagreed. The results of item 7 and the qualitative results indicate a kind of ambivalent attitude that the students had towards their expected role of the teacher, probably because of the traditional view of the teaching-learning process that lent authority to the teacher. Table 4 summarizes the results of the students' beliefs and affect and self-management.

Table 4. Students' beliefs, affect and self-management.

No.	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
10.	I believe I can be successful in learning English.	.4	.8	4.1	26.1	68.6
11.	I feel confident in my learning ability.	1.6	5.6	20.8	33.9	37.1
12.	I believe that I can achieve well in my learning.	0.0	.8	4.9	41.2	53.1
13.	I am willing to take responsibility for my learning.	0.0	3.3	6.9	43.7	46.1
14.	I believe that making mistakes is part of my learning	1.6	1.2	2.4	18.8	75.9
15.	I encourage myself to participate in class even if I am afraid that I would make mistakes.	6.9	12.2	14.3	38	28.6
16.	When I feel stressed about my learning, I know what to do about it.	6.9	31.8	18.4	30.6	12.2
17.	I try to create good conditions under which I can learn best.	2.4	4.9	9.8	47.8	35.1
18.	I am resilient, not easily discouraged, and I persevere.	4.5	15.9	24.9	36.7	18

In the third sub-scale, most of the first five items pertained to students' beliefs and received high levels of agreement responses. For example, concerning item 10, many participants agreed (26.1%) or strongly agreed (68.6%), whereas only a few disagreed. Results across the remaining items were almost similar, indicating positive learners' beliefs about their learning. However, higher negative results were demonstrated in response to item 16, and significant negative results were shown in item 18. These items are related to students' affect and self-management, where disagreement levels were observed to be higher. Table 5 presents the results of social and other behaviors.

Table 5. Social and other behaviors.

No.	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
19.	I can make good use of materials.	3.3	13.5	13.5	43.7	26.1
20.	I can identify the websites that are useful for my learning.	2	9.4	12.7	40.4	35.5
21.	I try to find opportunities to use English outside the classroom.	1.6	5.7	7.3	32.2	53.1
22.	I know how to learn from and with others.	3.3	11.8	10.2	43.7	31

The fourth sub-scale results indicate that most participants manifested general self-regulated and social behaviors. For example, most respondents agreed (43.7%) or strongly agreed (26.1%) that they could use materials and resources well when studying at home. In contrast, only a minority of them disagreed. Almost similar results were obtained concerning the rest of the items. The last results about the students' self-assessment and learning strategies are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Students' self-assessment and learning strategies.

No.	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
23.	I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.	5.3	16.7	18.8	39.2	20
24.	I can identify my learning strengths and weaknesses.	3.7	11.8	13.5	45.3	25.7
25.	I evaluate how well I can use English.	.8	10.6	26.1	44.5	18
26.	I know how to organize my learning time more effectively.	7.8	32.2	19.6	27.8	12.7
27.	I know how to choose the strategy of learning that suits me best and use it.	2	16.3	17.6	38	26.1
28.	I can describe the learning strategies that I use.	4.1	17.6	16.2	42	19.6

In response to item 23, over half of the participants agreed (39.2%) or strongly agreed (20%) that they had their own ways of testing how much they have learned. However, a significant proportion of them disagreed. Regarding items 24 and 25, almost similar results were demonstrated with a quarter and a third of the participants, respectively, who either disagreed or remained neutral. In response to statement 26, less than half of the participants agreed (27.8%) or strongly agreed (12.7%). However, almost two-thirds of them disagreed (32.2%), strongly disagreed (7.8%) or remained neutral (19.6%). Regarding statement 27, more than half of the respondents agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (26.1%), a finding that is almost similar to the results of the previous item.

4.2 Analysis of the Qualitative Findings

The qualitative strand is needed to explain whether or not students know how to use a certain strategy because perceiving oneself as an autonomous learner does not ensure knowing what it constitutes. The analysis of each case and the sixteen cases' responses yielded three main themes relating to the participants' autonomy, including the importance of autonomy, the student-teacher relationship, and the student's own initiatives and responsibilities. It is worth noting that the participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3, and so on. What follows is a description of these themes.

4.2.1 *The importance of autonomy*

This theme emerges from the data analysis: "Does autonomy play a role in your learning? Explain why or why not". Results obtained from this question across the participants are positive. Indeed, most interviewees stated that taking control of their own learning is very important. Further scrutiny of the data revealed that the participants mentioned some important reasons why one should be an autonomous learner. For example, P1 stated that being an autonomous learner:

- (1) ...helps us learn better by doing readings on our own because the teacher cannot give us everything. (P1)

4.2.2 *The student-teacher relationship*

The second theme that emerges from the analysis of the responses to the question of the students' expected roles of the teacher was related to how they viewed themselves in relation to their teachers and what roles they would assign to the latter. The results generally reveal that the teacher's role, as viewed by the participants, is that of a guide and a facilitator. In this respect, P3 noted, "the teacher should guide us and facilitate things for us when we find something difficult". Some went even further to determine how much is expected of a teacher. For example, P2 mentioned that she "prefer[s] the teacher to give [her] 25%". P15 stated that:

- (2) I expect my teachers to guide me, and the rest depends on me. For example, to show me the things that I should focus on and look for by myself because I consider him as a guide, not as the one who provides me with everything I don't understand. (P15)

Another way of describing the students' views of their roles and their teachers' is in terms of the choice of the content to be taught in class. The question was: "Whose responsibility should it be to choose the content to be taught in class?" The participants were divided into two main types of responses: those who said it is only the teacher's responsibility, which was voted by the majority, and those who advocated a shared responsibility between both parties. Regarding shared responsibility, some participants stated that students and teachers should decide on the content. For example, P7 elaborated on his comment as follows:

- (3) The teacher is responsible for the course, but sometimes it is a good opportunity to let students bring with them some new lessons, just to be more helpful to the other students, and those lessons, of course, must be related to the course we are studying. (P7)

4.2.3 Student's own initiatives and responsibilities

One of the questions the participants were asked to elicit their autonomous practices, especially related to the student's initiatives and responsibilities, is: "How do you usually study?" This question was asked to understand whether or not students could explain their usual study plans as another way of depicting some autonomous behaviors. The analysis indicates that most students were identified to do some activities showing their initiative and responsibilities. For example, P6 noted that he attended his classes in the classroom, read some other materials, such as books, and listened to native speakers as an act of out-of-class learning.

Another question is: "How much time do you devote to your studies outside the classroom?" In response to this question, most students reported no specific time. Indeed, P8 said that he would study for two hours and sometimes the whole day. Generally, the time the participants would devote to their studies outside the classroom differed, depending on whether it was an exam period or not. This indicates that they were exam-oriented and lacked effective time management, as the quantitative results indicated. For example, P9 explained that:

- (4) As you can see, in the period of the exams, we are spending four hours per day. However, in the period of normal days, we spend, let's say, one hour or two hours reading books and novels. So, it depends on the period. (P9)

Another question is, "What does being responsible for your learning mean?" The analysis identifies two types of learners: reactive and proactive. On the one hand, some

equated responsibility with attending classes and doing what is assigned to them only (reactive autonomous learners), which applies to the majority. On the other hand, others understood it as going beyond the usual assigned tasks or activities and taking initiative (proactive autonomous learners).

Concerning the self-assessment question, students were asked: “Do you check your progress? Explain how”. Most participants said they would check their progress, but they did it in different ways. For example, P6 noted that he would sometimes check his progress by accessing some tests on the internet. Another participant (P10), in addition to doing some exercises online, recorded himself on the phone and later listened to his voice to check his speaking. Moreover, P1 said she would check her progress by reading books. She explained her method as follows:

- (5) Every time, I check my progress to see if I am improving or not. I do it by reading some easy books first; then, I read more complex books. If I understand the idea in these books, I feel I am progressing in my learning. (P1)

However, the other participants either do not check their progress or, if they do, they did not provide any examples of how they would do so when asked to explain more.

Based on the results presented in this section, the qualitative data show that the participants’ responses varied considerably. The results also prove that perceiving oneself as engaging in a certain activity or a strategy does not necessarily mean knowing how to practice that activity or strategy, which applies to some of the participants in the present study.

Generally, students assessed their overall ability and readiness for assuming autonomy in their own learning positively. The quantitative results revealed that these students were more likely to set goals and accept responsibility for their learning. This was further probed in the interview, which shows that students had positive beliefs about autonomy. While this perceived level of readiness may indicate their readiness to learn autonomously, the qualitative results further demonstrate some aspects they could not control, especially regarding the choice of the content to be taught in class. These findings are discussed below in light of the literature and the results of other studies conducted in other contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings obtained in this study, EFL students’ perceived level of autonomy is generally significantly high. Adding the two levels of agreement (94.7%, 89.8%, 82.9%, and 82%), the percentages are rather high with regard to aspects related to their belief to be successful in their learning, their willingness to take responsibility for their learning, their use of English outside the classroom, and setting learning goals. Also, the qualitative results support some of the quantitative results, with the exception of the participants’ lack of the ability to choose the content to be taught, which is an important aspect of autonomy. Although some consistency in the quantitative and the qualitative results exists, students in the present study still could not choose or influence the content to be brought to the classroom.

In relation to setting goals, the results of the current study are in congruence with Dang’s (2012) study of Vietnamese EFL students who were found to be engaged in

setting goals for their learning. Nunan (1997), in his five levels of autonomy, 'creation' is considered a level at which learners can create and set learning goals, a fact demonstrated by most of the participants in the present study. Moreover, it has been found that the level of students' learning with and from others appeared to be among the highest-rated aspects (74.7%). In fact, the literature has already pointed to the fact that being autonomous does not mean being totally detached from others (Little, 2007) because most of the time, learners' "independent efforts to control learning are often episodic and ineffective" (Benson, 2011, p. 91). Concerning their confidence in their learning ability, the participants reported a high level of agreement with a percentage of 71%, a finding by Saeed's (2021) study in which his participants displayed the fourth highest-rated agreement response for the same item.

Similarly, the qualitative analysis revealed that all the students are responsible for their learning. However, examining their responses at a theoretical level yielded two types of autonomous learners: reactive and proactive. The analysis show that most of the participants were reactive autonomous learners, and few of them were identified to be of proactive type. Knowles et al. (2015) considered the latter type more desirable because learners who take the initiative usually perform well in their learning.

The students' views and practices of autonomous learning constitute an implicit acknowledgment of the indispensable role of the teacher, mainly as a facilitator who mediates between them and the content they are taught rather than being the transmitter or source of knowledge. In other words, the students generally do not only appear to be autonomous, but they also seem to understand, except for some students, the idea that taking control over one's learning does not mean excluding the role of the teacher, which is compatible with the literature (Benson, 2011). Contrary to these results, studies carried out in other EFL contexts (e.g., Arabia, 2017) found that the respondents were identified to have a low level of autonomy readiness in their learning and, thus, were teacher-dependent.

The above results and most other studies' results indicate that EFL learners may be autonomous in some aspects and lack control over others. Also, some students showed instances of autonomy, whereas others did not. This is consistent with the literature that autonomy is a matter of degrees (Nunan, 1997), that these degrees are unstable (Sinclair, 2008), and that it may not be achieved by all learners, some of whom may depend on the teacher (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). This study attempted to understand autonomy in a context with a noticeable dearth of research on the concept. In investigating this topic, the study used a scale that included various aspects and characteristics of autonomous learners to fully capture how EFL learners are ready for autonomy in their learning.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated Moroccan EFL students' perceptions of and readiness for autonomy in their learning. Based on the findings, it is evident that EFL students' perceived level of autonomy generally significantly high. The highest percentages, when adding the two levels of agreement (94.7%, 89.8%, 85.3%, and 82%), have been evident in the students' tendency to believe that they can achieve success in their learning, their willingness to take responsibility for their learning, their use of English outside the classroom, and their establishment of learning goals. The

qualitative data support some aspects of the quantitative results and reveal other aspects over which students could not have control.

Although many students showed a satisfactory level of autonomy, others failed to reach this level. Furthermore, even those who demonstrated high levels in certain aspects of autonomous learning appeared to underrate other aspects of the same construct. In addition to these comparisons of perceived rates on the scale items, the results obtained were also discussed in the light of both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview to cross-check the quantitative and the qualitative findings. For example, while students seemed highly willing to negotiate which activities should be included in the classroom, the qualitative results revealed their reliance on the teacher in choosing the content to be taught. In terms of their ability to engage in autonomous learning, it can be concluded that they showed some autonomy in several ways. For example, they reported the use of learning strategies, the establishment of learning goals, and an increased awareness of their roles and those of their teachers. The findings of this study seem promising but suggest that some students could not show autonomy in all its aspects. Therefore, some implications for teachers, syllabus designers, and future research can be drawn in light of these conclusions.

Given the current situation, teachers must raise their students' awareness of the importance of assuming autonomy in their learning and involve them in the decision-making concerning what activities to be carried out inside the classroom. Teachers may also use the study's autonomy items as descriptors for a reference checklist to assess their learners' readiness for taking control of their learning. However, as is often the case in our local context, university teachers play multifaceted roles, encompassing those of instructors, autonomy advocates, syllabus designers, and more. Different teachers may adopt different approaches. Therefore, it is crucial to devise a model that can guide teachers in developing autonomy-oriented pedagogy and, by extension, promote autonomy within their classes. Furthermore, it is pedagogically sound for a teacher to guide and help students in areas where they may still struggle to achieve autonomy. The teacher raising their awareness therein should challenge any discouraging belief that students may hold to learn autonomously.

Additionally, since this study only involved the students, including teachers for future research may yield other important insights. Understanding teachers' beliefs could be integral to their readiness to promote autonomy in their students. Moreover, the present research relied on two instruments, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, through which the results were obtained. Future research may include, in addition to these instruments, other forms of data collection such as learners' portfolios and diary.

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