# Exploring Learning Autonomy: An Investigation into the Perceptions and Practices of ENCG Students in the Acquisition of English Language Skills

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*Abstract:*
*This study investigates the notion of learner autonomy in EFL in the Moroccan School of Business and Management (ENCG). The concept of autonomy aims to empower learners to possess the necessary life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity to excel both personally and professionally. Learner autonomy was first introduced in the late 1970s and since then has been considered a learning goal in most educational curricula. In Morocco, all educational reforms, especially after 2000, have stressed the urgent need for key life skills to meet the requirements of the job market and globalised world. The present study examines the perceptions and practices of ENCG students towards learner autonomy in EFL. A sample of 662 ENCG students completed an online survey to gather quantitative data. Findings revealed that learners hold positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and take part in activities depicting autonomous practices and behaviors. These students demonstrate a strong awareness of strategies that contribute to learner autonomy and exhibit motivation to independently acquire English language skills at ENCG. In summary, the research establishes a robust basis for the potential growth and expansion of learner autonomy across various universities in Morocco.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century needs a new kind of learners who are able to think critic-creatively and act independently. Because of this, education practitioners are constantly working to turn their learners into self-reliant learners equipped with Duncan's (2012) 21st century skills or Tony Wagner's (2008) "survival skills". Skills like creativity, collaboration, communication and problem solving combine to empower the individual so that he can achieve success both in his personal and professional lives (Mercer, 2019; Razak et al., 2020). This same learner, by time, will serve as a responsible and active citizen within society. Therefore, the focus should be to enable the student acquire the ability of learning autonomously and effectively and transfer what he has learned to wider environments. In English language learning, learner autonomy

has come to be seen as an ultimate goal of education wherein the learner is an active contributor to the process of learning rather than a mere observer and consumer of knowledge (Nunan 2003 ; Benson, 2011). However, letting learners take control of their learning can never take place if they are not ready and willing to take the lead and get involved in the classroom activities (Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen, 2017). The overall objective of this study is to explore learners' attitudes and practices towards learner autonomy as well as teachers' role in the cultivation of this capacity. Therefore, a survey questionnaire is adopted to investigate these perceptions and behaviors towards learning autonomously in EFL for students of the National School of Business and Management (ENCG) in Morocco.

**Study Question**

This current study seeks to answer these two major questions:

1- What perceptions and attitudes do ENCG students hold towards learner autonomy in EFL?

2- What practices do ENCG students carry out to enhance learning English on their own?

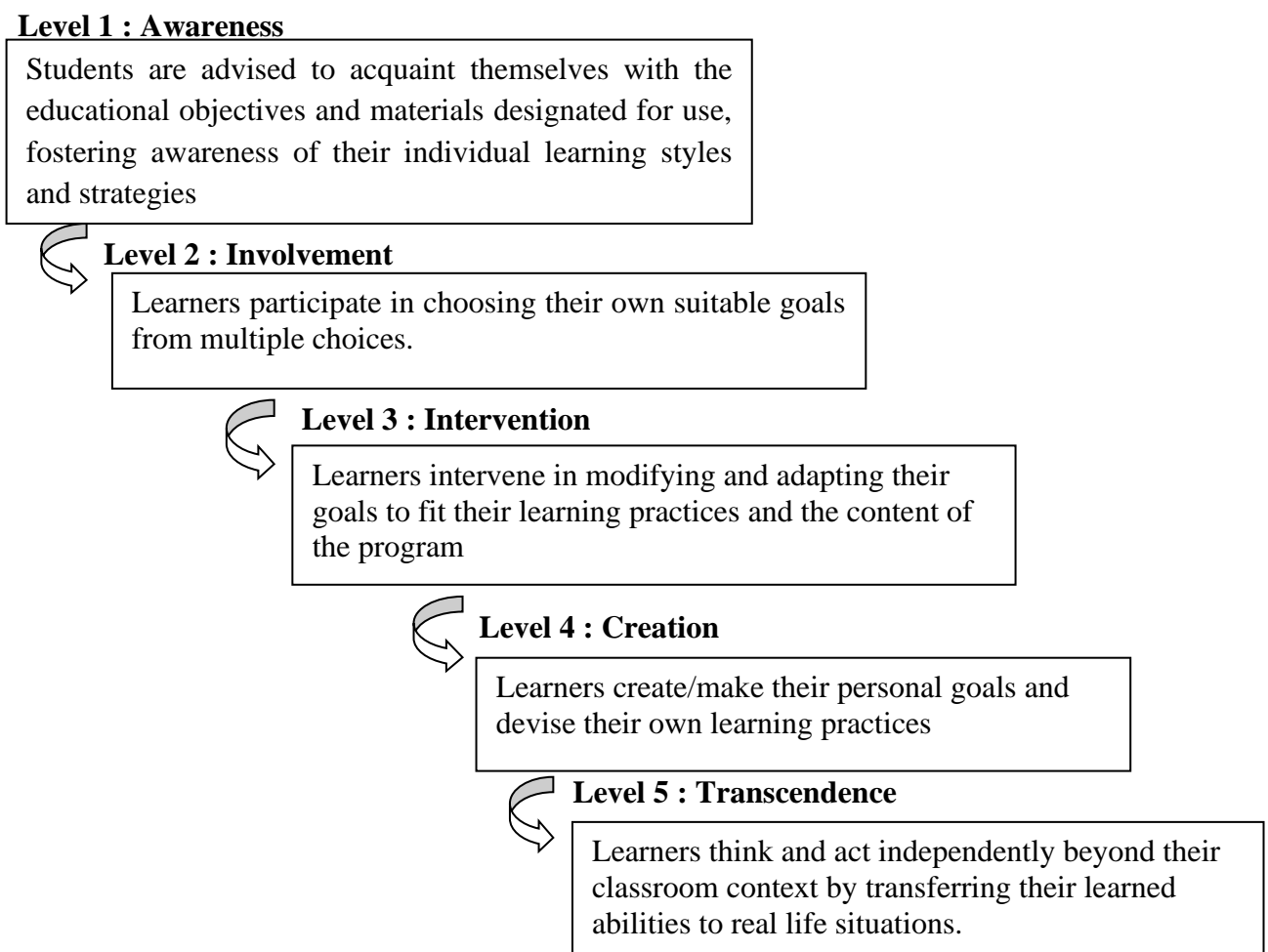## 2. Conceptional Framework

### 2.1 Definition of learner autonomy

"Autonomous learning" (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013) or "self-directed learning" (Long, 1989) was first introduced by Henri Holec in his report entitled "Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning" (1979) for the Council of Europe. Holec (1981) describes it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". He also affirms that, ''the word ability means capacity, and the term "to take charge" means take responsibility". By way of explanation, this learning trend entails full commitment from learners to engage physically, mentally, and cognitively to make learning take place. In other words, learner autonomy requires that learners are fully in charge of their learning and behave accordingly. This is explicitly stated by Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017), "it is impossible to take charge of one's learning without at the same time accepting responsibility for it, at least implicitly".

Holec goes further to consider learner autonomy as a learning outcome. In other words, it is not an innate ability that everyone is endowed with. However, it must be acquired "naturally" or "formally", "systematically" or "deliberately" (Holec, 1981). Next to the need to learn the language rules and the communication skills, the learner is asked to acquire the habit of learning autonomously: "to help learners to achieve their linguistic and communicative goals on the one hand and to become autonomous in their learning on the other" (cited in Little, Dam & Lengenhausen, 2017). Learner autonomy stems from constructivism, urging learners to avoid passively absorbing information and instead create their own knowledge. This empowers them steer their learning process according to their needs and preferences. Moreover, it enables self-regulation, where learners proactively engage in learning rather than seeing it a passive outcome of direct instruction (Zimmerman, 2001).

### 2.1 Steps of attaining learning autonomy

Autonomous learning's noticeable impact goes beyond the classroom to influence the personal and professional development of the individual and thus the group (Little, Dam, & Lengenhausen, 2017). To put it another way, autonomous learning helps build a society of responsible and thoughtful citizens whose decisions contribute to the development of their communities as a whole. This is stressed by Little (1991) when he states that "the capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts". For him, "the concept of learner autonomy is closely associated with the desire to remove the barriers that often exist between learning and the rest of living".

When learners take control of their learning through using the 21st century skills, they will be able to transfer their abilities outside the classroom. They will take "more control over their learning in classrooms and outside them" (Benson, 2001). To achieve this endmost goal, the learner should go through 5 stages to develop this autonomy in Nunan's view (1997). The five stages of attaining learner autonomy are as follows:

**Level 1 : Awareness**

Students are advised to acquaint themselves with the educational objectives and materials designated for use, fostering awareness of their individual learning styles and strategies

**Level 2 : Involvement**

Learners participate in choosing their own suitable goals from multiple choices.

**Level 3 : Intervention**

Learners intervene in modifying and adapting their goals to fit their learning practices and the content of the program

**Level 4 : Creation**

Learners create/make their personal goals and devise their own learning practices

**Level 5 : Transcendence**

Learners think and act independently beyond their classroom context by transferring their learned abilities to real life situations.

**Figure 1**. Levels of autonomy implementation (Adapted from Nunan, 1997)

Nunan (1997) in the chart above displays the transformation that occurs to the person from being a dependent learner in a teacher-controlled classroom context to a fully autonomous citizen within a democratic society as confirmed by Little (1991) "there are no barriers between

learning and living" and "this should make them more useful members of society and more effective participants in the democratic process". Simply put, learners don't only learn the language for academic purposes, but they are also asked to use it informally to tackle issues that matter to them. (Little, 2000; Benson, 2002)

Along with stressing the magnitude of autonomy for learners, Nunan (1997) admits that developing this characteristic in learners needs special care while processing for two main reasons. First, every learner is different which entails that the teacher is bound to make the pedagogical procedures case-specific to suit each learner. Second, autonomy is a question of degree since it is not an "absolute concept" (p.193). Therefore, for Nunan (1997), not all learners are able to attain autonomy within the same period of time using the same autonomy-raising techniques.

Furthermore, Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1991) identify 3 stages through which the learner moves from a spontaneous unconscious learning of a task to a more self-organized autonomous-like learning. The first stage is marked by "dogged practice and repetition". In this stage, the learner relies merely on imitation using structured drilling. In the second stage, the learner shows less attachment to the task though it remains the focus of attention. The learner, here, attains some freedom of action to reflect on the task. However, he is still restricted to go beyond what is assigned. In the third stage, learners shift from focusing on the task at hand to focusing on the process of learning. In other words, the task, in the last stage, is a means to explore a process rather than a product. However, most learners, according to Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1991) find huge difficulties in reaching the last stage especially with the absence or lack of assistance from their teachers. This correlates with Holec's belief that the teacher's role is paramount in achieving autonomous learning.

Additionally, Klimas (2017) argues that learners may influence their learning at three related levels. Firstly, they can manage their learning by using strategies to plan, organize, and assess their progress. Secondly, they can regulate their cognitive processes, focusing on the mental aspects that direct and operate their learning. Lastly, they can "control" the learning content, involving their abilities to establish and evaluate their own learning objectives. Klimas also stresses the significance of setting "self-determined" goals for an authentic and dynamic learning experience.

## 2.2 Characteristics of autonomous learners

For Hughes (2003), autonomous learners should enjoy certain characteristics as follows:
   a. self-awareness and reflection: learners should be conscious of the learning processes they go through as well as reflect on these processes.
   b. intrinsically motivated: motivation is indispensible to achieve a high level of learning autonomy because it helps trigger learners' curiosity and attainment.
   c. being in control of the learning environment: independent learners need a safe environment to exercise their learning activities.
   d. knowing the formal system in which the procedures operate.
   e. the capacity of formulating questions.
   f. having the necessary skills of investigating the information,.
   g. collaboration or interdependence: they should have the willingness to work with their peers and tolerate their teachers' interference when needed.

    **h.** enjoying the creative-critical thinking skills that enable them to think beyond the assigned task and act globally.

    **i.** being conscious of the subject or discipline under study.

In similar vein, Hedge (2000) characterizes the autonomous learner as one who:

    **a.** is interested in learning inside and outside the classroom setting.

    **b.** knows his needs and is ready to work with his tutor to achieve the learning goals.

    **c.** can construct knowledge using the materials handed out by the teacher.

    **d.** is resourceful in finding new learning materials

    **e.** is thinking actively during learning.

    **f.** is able to adapt the learning strategies to abrupt circumstances so as to improve attainment

    **g.** manages the learning time appropriately.

    **h.** doesn't believe that the teacher is the only source of knowledge.

Another characterization of autonomous learners is provided by Wenden (1991) who states that autonomy means:

    **a.** the willingness to be in charge of one's own learning

    **b.** being motivated to learn

    **c.** having good guessing and hypothesizing abilities.

    **d.** paying attention to details of the tasks at hand

    **e.** the readiness to take risks

    **f.** making decisions and choices related to learning.

    **g.** evaluating the learning outcomes.

    **h.** being active while learning.

Wagner (2008) stresses that students should possess certain "survival skills" to be ready for the 21st century. He indentifies these skills as follows:

    **a.** critical thinking and problem solving

    **b.** collaboration and leadership

    **c.** agility and adaptibility

    **d.** initiative and entrepreneurialism

    **e.** effective oral and written communication

    **f.** accessing the analyzing information

    **g.** curiosity and imagination.

### 2.3 Factors affecting learner autonomy

Another issue that was brought into light in relation to learner autonomy is the affective or the psychological aspect. Benson (2007) thinks that the psychological capacities of learners (to determine their goals, evaluate and reflect on the outcomes) influence their autonomous management of learning. Ricci (2013) affirms that teachers should reinforce the "growth mindset classroom". He defines the classroom as "a safe place where students don't feel judged and are free to take intellectual risks". Positive feelings should surround the learning environment which, in turn, will boost learner's autonomy since this latter promotes motivation and motivation promotes attainment (Scharle and Szabo (2000) cited in Nguyen and Nguyen (2020)). In consistency with the same thought, Elashhab (2020) also thinks that in order for learners to be autonomous, they need a more relaxing environment where motivation is the key. In addition, this has been endorsed by Ellis (2008) who believes that learners' perceptions play a crucial role in the success of autonomous learning. She advocates that teachers should

be more aware of their learners' beliefs about learning before they attempt to introduce autonomy-supportive techniques to their learners. According to Macaro, (2008) motivation is associated with goal-setting; learning autonomy doesn't only mean taking control of one's learning, but also having the chance to determine the learning goals and objectives. In other words, learners may opt for their own learning track, under their tutor's supervision. This was reiterated by Benson (2001) who recognizes the importance of teachers in raising their students' awareness of the efficient ways to set learning objectives, opt for strategies, specify tasks and determine resources to achieve their objectives.

However, learners might have difficulties if they are handed over the power to take charge of their own learning at once. To prevent such a predicament, Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017) suggest providing students with more options so that their interest and commitment are stimulated gradually. That's why; teachers need to help their learners to "learn how to learn". This notion of "learning to learn" is synonymous with "meta-learning" which was first defined by Donald B. Maudsley (1979) as "the process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning, and growth that they have internalized". This objective of "meta-learning" can't fully be met without the teachers' scaffolding, involvement, and supervision. This raises the role of curricula designers and their contributions to making educational programs autonomy supportive, learner-centered and process-oriented (Benson, 2011)

## 3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions raised beforehand, the researcher designed an online questionnaire to collect the maximum amount of data to reflect the real image of the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors endorsed by the students of ENCG towards the notion of autonomy. The choice of investigating the learners of this School stems from the scarcity of research related to ESP in Morocco. ENCG refers to the National School of Business and Management. It has branches in 12 cities around the country and offers 5 years of academic track. Additionally, it offers classes of English for Business Purposes. A piloting process was first carried about with 63 students of the same school to make sure of the clarity and intelligibility of the items of the questionnaire which were in line with the review of literature discussed previously. The questionnaire was communicated to different participants from the ENCG schools in the cities of Settat, Casablanca and Eljadida. The data and personal information collected from the questionnaire were declared anonymous and respondents were knowledgeable about the confidentiality of their answers.

The adopted survey contains several multiple choices and one open-ended question. Therefore, both numeric and quantitative data were displayed and analyzed using graphs and forms accompanied with frequencies and percentages. It is worth noting that the survey targeted only first, second, and third year ENCG students. These three first years constitute the Common Core part of the academic track and English language is taught as a main subject in each semester. In total, 662 respondents filled out the survey. This self-completed and self-reported questionnaire addressed the following concerns:
- demographic characteristics of the participants
- their beliefs and practices towards learner autonomy
- their teacher' role in learner autonomy.
- their willingness and readiness to learn autonomously.
- the strategies they make use of to foster autonomy in English learning at their school.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The purpose of analyzing the date gathered for this study is to investigate the perceptions of students at ENCG towards learning English autonomously as well as their practices in and outside the classroom which would possibly foster their autonomous learning behavior. The findings are mostly statistically presented in form of pie graphs and a chart.

### 4.1 Demographics of the participants

This first section is devoted to find out about the personal and educational background of the participants sampled in this study.

**Table 1.** Gender of the participants

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------|-----------|------------|
| Female | 437 | 66% |
| Male | 225 | 34% |
| Total | 662 | 100% |

As the graph clearly shows above, female respondents represent 66% whereas males represent 34%.

**Table 2.** Level of education

| School year | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------|-----------|------------|
| 1st year | 243 | 36,70% |
| 2nd year | 164 | 24,80% |
| 3rd year | 255 | 38,50% |
| Total | 662 | 100% |

The above table clearly shows the percentages of students belonging to the first, second, and third year at ENCG School. 36,7 % of the participants study in the first year whereas 24, 8 % are in the second year. The remaining 38, 5% are in the third year at ENCG.

### 4.2 Learners' beliefs and practices towards learner autonomy
**Table 3.**

| Perceptions | 1- I make decisions and set goals for my learning. | 2- I make good use of my free time studying English. | 3- I prepare before the session (for example, I see a summary, review a lesson, etc) | 4- I take notes and make summaries of my lessons. | 5- I talk to my teachers and classmates outside the class in English | 6- During the session, I use every opportunity to take part in the activities to practise my English | 7- I use the library to improve my English | 8- I use the internet and other audio-visual materials to study and improve my English | 9- I attend events outside school to improve my English (such as seminars, study days, etc) | 10- I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them | 11- When I make progress in learning, I motivate/reward myself (such as I go out, buy myself something, etc) | 12- I evaluate what I have learned. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 89% | 58,2% | 57,1% | 86,3% | 46,1% | 66,8% | 27,2% | 93,5% | 32,6% | 60,6% | 53,8% | 72,2% |
| No | 11% | 42,2% | 42,9% | 13,7% | 53,9% | 33,2% | 72,8% | 6,5% | 67,4% | 39,4% | 46,2% | 27,8% |

From first sight at the informant's answers, most of them basically believe that they think and act autonomously. In most responses, the informants show a considerable amount of commitment towards the learning process which aligns with the assumptions of Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017) that stress the role of commitment and engagement towards achieving learner autonomy. For example, 89% of the participants set their own goals which is a basic trait of autonomous learners according to Wenden (1990). When learners determine their own goals, they have the opportunity to experience active learning according to Klimas (2017). 53,8% say that they motivate themselves which goes in line with Hughes (2003) who asserts that motivation is indispensible to achieve high degree of learner autonomy. 72,2 % of the participants evaluate their own progress and reflect on their learning outcomes. This ability and willingness to reflect on one's own work is essential in learner autonomy as previously seen with Wenden (1990). Self-evaluation is one important characteristic of autonomous learners. However, only 27,2 % say that they use the library to improve their language whereas 93,5% admit that they make use of their audio-visual materials to develop their language skills. Eventually, only 46,1 % say that they speak English outside class with their peers and teachers. This percentage seems reasonably understandable knowing that the main language of education at ENCG is French.

These positive perceptions towards learner autonomy that the participants expressed in their answers can determine the success of their autonomous work. This is supported by Ellis (2008) who affirms that teachers' awareness of their students' attitudes can help them adopt the suitable techniques to enhance their learners' autonomy.
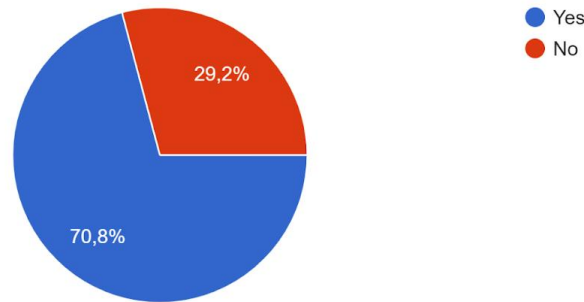
### 4.3 Teacher's role in learner autonomy

**Figure 2.**

My teacher motivates me to become an autonomous learner of English.
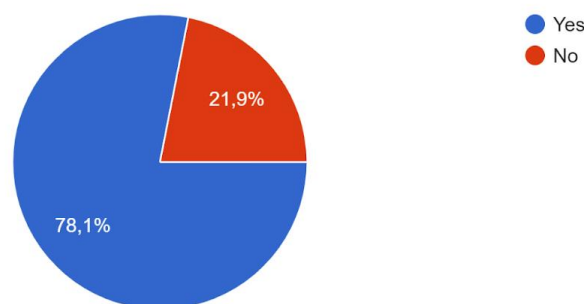662 réponses



More than half of the informants, about 70 %, affirm that their teachers motivate them to be autonomous learners. Ossou (2020) concludes that Moroccan EFL teachers are willing and ready to help their learners learn autonomously. By providing a safer and more relaxing environment, learners have more intellectual freedom to think and take learning risks (Ricci, 2013). Therefore, teachers pave the way for their learners to develop their self-reliance skills. As asserted by Elashhab (2020), motivation is the key to achieving high degrees of learner autonomy. Teachers' role is essential to develop learners' autonomy as stated by Thomas and Harri-Augustein (1990) who think that it is very challenging for learners to attain a high degree of learner independence without the assistance of their teachers.

### 4.4 Learner's willingness and readiness for autonomy
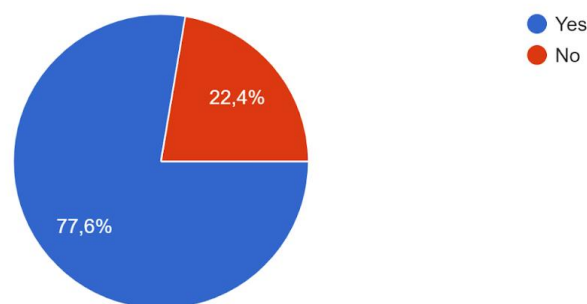
**Figures 3.**

I know what I need to learn to improve my English
662 réponses



**Figure 4.**

I know how to learn English
662 réponses



The statistics demonstrate in figure 4 and 5 that more than 77% of the respondents believe that they own the skills of what and how to learn. This conviction may stand as a backbone so that they can achieve learner autonomy. This is what Donald B. Maudsley referred to as "meta-learning". It is the capacity of learners to acquire learning skills and strategies to learn on their own or with their teachers' guidance and instruction. This capacity is usually taught by teachers so that learners don't feel the abrupt change when they are handed in the responsibility over their learning.

**Figure 5.**

I think I am able to learn English by my own (alone)
662 réponses
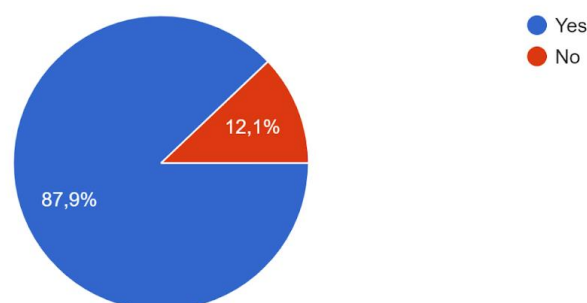


Simply put, more than 87 % of the respondents believe that they are able to learn autonomously. This belief is aligned with the two previous answers in which most of the participants expressed their certainty of knowing what and how to learn English. Not only do they hold positive attitudes towards the notion of learner autonomy, but they are also convinced of their ability to learn English on their own. Nevertheless, they must be aided to be able to hold this burden of guiding and deciding on their own learning. Little (1996) stresses that learners mustn't be left alone in front of this huge self-work, but teachers need to equip them with suitable tools and opportunities to get accustomed beforehand. Teachers should play other roles rather than being the source of knowledge. By adjusting their roles to be facilitators or organizers of learning, they help their students hold more responsibility for their own learning choices and artifacts.

**Figure 6.**

I want to be responsible for my learning.
662 réponses
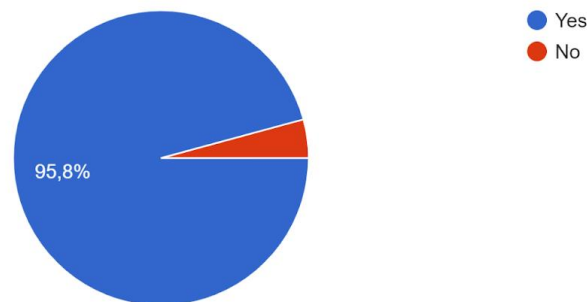


As the graph shows, more than 95% of the respondents emphasize their willingness to take charge of their learning. This aligns with Little, Dam, and Lengenhausen (2017) who affirm that being in charge of one's own learning requires necessarily the willingness to hold this responsibility. Thus, the informants, in this study, are inclined to accept this obligation of being autonomous learners.

### 4.5 Learners' strategies to foster autonomy

Noteworthy that learners' consciousness about certain strategies may drive their desire to be more autonomous. In reference to the following last question in the survey, the respondents have proven considerable knowledge of concrete, practical and independent ways to develop their autonomy skills. In reply to the question "What strategies do you use to learn English on your own?" 367 answers were provided by the respondents. They suggest various ways through which they think they will be able to achieve learner autonomy. To cite a few, one of the respondents affirms that one should "engage in activities like setting personal goals, using language learning apps, watching English movies, reading books, practicing speaking with native speakers, and regularly testing your language skills". Another participant asserts that "To become good at learning English by myself, I can start by figuring out why I want to learn it. Then, I'll make a plan for when I can practice. Every day, I'll learn new words and read things in English, like stories or articles. I'll listen to English songs or shows to understand how words are said. I won't be shy about talking in English – I can talk with friends or online. I'll also write in English, like a diary or short sentences. I know it might take time, but if I keep trying and stay curious, I'll get better at English!". "To achieve autonomy in learning English, you can engage in activities like setting personal language goals, practicing regular reading and writing, using language learning apps, watching English movies with subtitles, participating in language exchange programs, and seeking out online resources for grammar and vocabulary", one of the informants adds.

The answers, which are cited here word-for-word as provided by the participants, seem to be commonly-shared by most informants. In fact, those who have supplied these answers show substantial knowledge about the fundamentals of successful learning through autonomy-leading strategies. They use diverse tools to improve their language mainly reading books,

audio visualising and speaking to others in English. Moreover, they have also stated that they set their own learning goals and choose the suitable learning materials by themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that ENCG learners hold positive perceptions towards autonomy in learning English. They also show a great potential for improving their learner autonomy, thanks to the strategies and practices they already utilise as university students. Furthermore, they consider the role of the teacher as important in the learning process because of the motivation, support and guidance he provides. Essential also to mention the fact that the respondents have firm beliefs of their abilities of becoming successful autonomous learners.

That being concluded, because learner autonomy is a complex notion to measure, this study falls in short of evidence to prove whether the responding learners display learner autonomy in their behavior in class. More interviews and observations should be carried out to have clear ideas about autonomy behaviors of learners in practice. Overall, one should admit that learner autonomy is inevitable, and learners should be empowered to take their learning in charge to achieve academic success (Dam, and Lengenhausen, 1996; Griffiths, 2015). More learning responsibilities should be handed over to learners to think, plan and make decisions inside and outside the classroom environment.

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