Learner Autonomy: Attitudes and Practices of Moroccan University Students in English Departments

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Abstract
The study at hand examines learner autonomy in the Moroccan higher education context. The relevance of autonomy stems from the need to empower learners with the necessary life skills to succeed both in their personal and professional lives. This study is thus concerned with the possible ways to foster autonomy within Moroccan University students. It also takes into account how teaching English at university and motivating autonomous behaviours in classrooms can be attained in an integrated way. To these ends, quantitative research was conducted through a survey of 326 students studying English at Moroccan universities. Findings revealed a great awareness of the importance of learner autonomy among Moroccan university students. These students hold positive attitudes towards learning autonomously and are engaged in manifesting various autonomous behaviours in class. In short, the survey yielded evidence of very promising ground upon which can be built a culture of autonomy in Moroccan higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

"A good education refers to more than academic learning, and instead supports the growth of the whole student" (Norrish, 2015, p. 296). The growth Norrish refers to in this quote affirms that, ideally, academic and life skills are to be dealt with in an integrated way across the curriculum without the pressure of attaining concrete immediate results. Moreover, now, in the 21st century, learners need what Duncan (2009) refers to as 21st century skills: "skills that increasingly demand creativity, perseverance, and problem solving combined with performing well as part of a team" (cited in Lanson & Miller, 2011, p. 121). White and Murray (2015) acknowledge that 21st century challenges need special skills, part of which are creative thinking, independent work, and collaboration. Mercer (2019, p. 10) goes on to insist that people need these skills in order to flourish in their professional and personal lives. The focus should be to help the individual learn the necessary skills to succeed in his/her education such as critical thinking and collaboration but without forgetting that he/she has to live in society and ought to acquire the needed skills to operate within that system, with the social awareness to contribute positively to their communities. This association of both types of skills results in the empowerment of the individual so that he/she can become lifelong learners with ample strategies for success (Razak et al., 2020; Sayeh & Razkane, 2021).

This article takes the stance, from the outset that "successful learning draws on the learner's capacity for autonomous behaviour" (Little, Dam & Legauhausen, 2017, p. 15). This position is supported by a number of studies (see, Dyson, 2004; Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011) which investigated and measured learner autonomy, demonstrating that developing learner autonomy has "a positive impact not just on foreign language learning but on personal development more

generally" (Little, Dam & Legauhausen, 2017, p. 179). Aoki (2002: 111), defines learner autonomy as "the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own learning. " Importantly, "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" (Little, 1991, p. 4). Identifying and fostering these behaviors and exploring their implications on the learning process can contribute to a rich, autonomously supportive environment that allows students' growth.

2.   Learner Autonomy
2.1.   Defining Learner Autonomy

Various terms are used to refer to learner autonomy, such as "self-directed learning" (Long, 1989), "independent learning" (Little, 1988; Scott et al., 2015), and "autonomous learning" (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013). Autonomy was first defined by Holec (1981, p. 3) as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," which entails that learners become part and parcel of the whole learning process, from deciding on the learning outcomes to the evaluation of their achievements. Holec asserts that learners are then faced with a reality they themselves "construct" and "dominate" (1981, p. 21). More than this, learner autonomy presupposes that learners accept the responsibility for their learning and act accordingly. As stated by Little, Dam, and Legauhausen (2017, p. 75), "it is impossible to take charge of one's learning without at the same time accepting responsibility for it, at least implicitly." Holec (1981, p. 23) further sees autonomy as being one of two critical outcomes for language teaching: "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 & Legauhausen, 2017, p. 5). Language students must thus develop the capacity to manage their own learning to become autonomous learners. Jimenez and Vieira (2015, p. 15) put it clearly when they claim that "to become lifelong learners, students must learn both content and how to learn independently."

Jimenez, Lamb, and Viera (2007, p. 1) step further when they include another dimension of autonomous behaviour, namely, "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments." A student who attains this competence becomes, in turn, equipped with the competencies to behave and succeed in social life, as they develop their capacities to transfer the acquired knowledge and abilities to other situations outside the classroom environment. From this it follows that fostering autonomy in classrooms can help students become autonomous citizens who are able to learn, reflect, and decide about their social life, i.e., lifelong active learners. This reminds us of what Simon (1996) heeds to when he speaks about the importance of students being able to "locate" and "use information" and no longer simply "remember" and "repeat": students are making use of the competencies they have acquired to handle different situations, in and outside classrooms (cited in Jimenez Raya & Vieira, 2015).

Other definitions of autonomy from different perspectives have been advanced. Cotterall (1995, p. 195), making his definition more concrete, claims that autonomy is "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics of taking control of their learning" (cited in Yu, 2000, p. 1415). Cotterall speaks about the behaviours the learner shows in class which indicate that he/she accepts the responsibility to take charge of his/her own learning: such a learner reacts positively to opportunities provided in class that are meant to foster their autonomy and help them create their own strategies and occasions to take decisions.

Benson (1997, 2006) adds the psychological perspective by focusing on attitudes and factors which make it possible for learners to take responsibility for their learning. Benson (2007) assumes that the capacity to manage one's own learning depends upon certain underlying psychological capacities including the capacity to determine purpose, evaluate outcomes (see also Holec, 1982), and reflect critically (see also little, 1991). Equally, Benson (2007) argues that autonomy is a 'usable' construct for teachers who want to help their learners develop autonomy. Along these lines the role of emotion is advanced by O´Leary (2014), who thinks autonomy in language learning "depends on the development of learners' psychological and emotional capacity to control their own learning through independent action" (after Salovey & Mayer, 1990); motivating autonomous behaviour means engaging students to take control of their own learning. Following this line of thought, Ricci (2013, p. 140) supposes that teachers ought to reinforce the "growth mindset classroom," which he defines as "a safe place where students do not feel judged and are free to take intellectual risks." When positive feelings and feedback are strengthened within classroom practices, students become involved in the learning process. Scharle and Szabo (2000) in Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) further argue that autonomy enhances motivation and motivation develops ability.

Concretely, handing over control to learners is a good start to make them involved in the learning process, but this can never take place if students themselves are not willing to take the initiative and be engaged in various classroom activities. Little, Dam, and Legauhausen (2017, p. 76) consider "learners' active involvement" a "first pedagogical responsibility" since students are encouraged to take initiative in the classroom and later take charge of their own learning. Equally, handing over control to students involves sharing lesson requirements and paving the way for students to decide on their objectives. However, this is not likely to take place if students are not willing to engage in the classroom procedures. Little, Dam, and Legauhausen (2017, pp. 79-80) have recommended providing students with various choices to allow for the responsibility shift. They believe that "the more choices we give them, the more we can expect to engage their interest and commitment."

Through all of the above, we must help students "learn how to learn." This notion of "learning to learn, i.e., the ability to pursue and organize one's own learning either individually or in groups, in accordance with one's own needs, and awareness of methods and opportunities," is part of the eight key competencies defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR: 2006) and is the core of all autonomous behaviours (see Dempster, 1990, for autonomy in practice). It drives students to use strategies, negotiate their utility, evaluate their learning outcomes, and then adapt and adopt ways to create a successful learning experience. Finally, following Jimenez and Vieira (2015, p. 37), we must recognize that "as learners become progressively involved in their own learning, it is expected that they will develop a sense of agency that operates beyond schooling and permeates their life."

2.2.   Why Learner Autonomy Matters

The development of autonomous learners is one of the major aims of a university education (Bryde & Milburn, 1990; Chemers et al., 2001; Elissa et al., 2010). University faculty and students have to face the ever-changing nature of the learning/teaching process, including the increasing need for learner autonomy. Learner autonomy has been a central aim of higher education and should be one of the ultimate goals of higher education (Bajrami, 2015) so as to prepare graduates for the job market (Yassin et al., 2020). Helping students manage their own learning can further pave the way for them to take responsibility for their future choices.

It is thus vital we foster learner autonomy in our classrooms. Dam (2009) states it clearly when he says that the learning objectives will not be achieved if students are not engaged and responsible for their own learning: that is, an autonomy-supportive learning environment can be a predictor of a successful learning experience. Indeed, the learning environment gets better "when autonomy becomes an educational goal" (Jimenez Raya & Vieira, 2015, p. 126). This raises the problem of how far the methods adopted to achieve the first objective, teaching content, and the second objective, fostering autonomy, are "compatible" (Holec, 1981, p. 23, cited in Little, Dam & Legauhausen, 2017, p. 5). Auspiciously, research has demonstrated that developing an autonomous mode of learning favours working on academic achievements simultaneously because it "involves the application of personal initiative in engaging with learning and finding resources and opportunities for learning, persistence in learning, and resourcefulness" (Ponton, Carr, & Confessore, 2000).

2.3.   Learner Autonomy as Used in this Research

The research in this article builds upon key elements from the above review of definitions, with a particular focus on the work of Benson (1997, p. 25), who distinguishes between learner autonomy as an attribute and autonomous learning as a mode of learning. "Autonomy," he writes, can be defined as follows:

- the act of learning on one's own and the technical ability to do so;
- the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning; and
- Control over the content and processes of one's own learning. (Benson, 1997, p. 37).

Relatedly, based on an extensive literature review, Raya, Lamb, and Viera (2007, pp. 58-66) identify nine broad pedagogical principles that can guide the development of a pedagogy for autonomy, what Benson (1997) would describe as part of the mode of autonomous learning:

- Encouraging responsibility, choice, and flexible control
- Providing opportunities for learning to learn and self-regulation
- Creating opportunities for cognitive autonomy support
- Creating opportunities for integration and explicitness
- Developing intrinsic motivation
- Differentiating instruction based on individual learners' styles and needs
- Encouraging action-orientedness
- Fostering conversational interaction
- Promoting reflective inquiry

(Raya, Lamb &Viera . 2007, pp. 58-66)

Noticeably, teachers play a central role in the fostering of learner autonomy. However, of equal if not more importance is the role of learners and their willingness to learn independently, without the need for constant directions or intervention on behalf of the teacher. Students are to accept and exercise this responsibility and have to agree with their teachers on this. Promoting learner autonomy should be a desirable goal from both sides.

2.4.   The Moroccan Higher Education Context: From Autonomy of Universities to Autonomy of Learners

This study focuses on the attitudes and experiences of Moroccan English language learners in higher education, issues of particular importance given the dramatic shift in educational policies in Morocco over the last decades. The changes have been mainly driven by the promotion of more "qualitative" standards, i.e., education should be aligned with international standards and equally with "quantitative" standards that are measured by the need to increase enrollment of Moroccan baccalaureate graduates into the higher education system and subsequently into the labour market. Reforms also sought to prevent attrition of students. Moreover, Moroccan universities were given "bigger financial and academic autonomy" (NCET, art, 150 as cited in Moumine & Zoulal, 2017, p. 54). The teacher as a figure of authority is no longer valid in the new approach to Moroccan education. Rather, he/she is to promote an autonomous learning mode in which the teacher takes on "different roles from information provider, counselor, learning manager, resource and promoter of problem solving oriented learning" (Boonma, 2020, p. 179).

2.5. Reforms within Moroccan Universities

In order to upgrade the educational system, Moroccan higher education has undergone several reforms and has taken different measures to improve and restructure university education. The main reform was set up within the National Charter for Education and Training (NECT) in 1999, which was meant to lay the foundation for the 21st century educational system. One of its main objectives was to improve the system of education from qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, as mentioned above. The years 2000-2009 were declared "a national decade of education" and training (NCET, 1999, ARTICLES 20-21, cited in Zoulal & Moumine, 2017, p. 53). However, the qualitative expectations of the reform were not met: enrollment in higher education increased but students were not ready to meet the demands of the labour market. Giving students access to university is one thing, preparing them for lifelong learning as outlined in international standards (e.g., CEFR) is another. Hence, His Majesty the King Mohamed VI, placing education at the forefront, asked for the implementation of the Emergency Plan 2009-2012. "The Emergency Plan was launched in 2009 in an attempt to improve the quality of education both on academic and social levels" (Moumine & Zoulal, 2017, p. 55). Moroccan universities were to fulfill their roles in generating knowledge, promoting research and matching the needs of the labour market. Nevertheless, various "recurring dysfunctions" were noted in the Moroccan education system in the analytical report of the National Authority of Evaluation (NAE) (CSEFRS 2014) (cited in Moumine & Zoulal, 2017, p. 55). In 2012-2013, for instance, only 6% of the students went on to enroll in a Master's degree (CSEFRS, 2014). Worse still, many university graduates remain unemployed and high university dropout rates and overcrowded classes persisted (El Kaidi, 2018).

Subsequently, the Strategic Vision of Reform 2015-2030 was launched to envisage alternatives so as to overcome the flaws of the previous reforms and work on the gaps noted by previous evaluative reports. The latter was based on three main principles: "equity and equal opportunity," "quality for all," and the "promotion of the individual and society" for all levels of the Moroccan educational system, bearing in mind both the qualitative and the quantitative perspectives of the growth and giving enough heed to the psychological support of the learners to help them persist until graduation. Crucially, the Bachelor's degree is now four years instead of three, a part of the new strategic vision (delayed in many universities because of the pandemic) which will allow time for more learner-centeredness, the promotion of linguistic

and soft skills, and civic and cultural integration. It will permit both the Moroccan university and the competencies of its graduates to be aligned with international standards. The last point to mention within this new system is digitalization and the promotion of e-learning, an objective that has been reinforced with the pandemic. Students need to have the necessary platforms, human resources, and training to take control of their own learning. Learner autonomy has become "a pedagogical imperative" (Little, Dam & Legauhausen, 2017, p. 17), which Moroccan universities have begun to recognize and work towards.

We have to admit that regardless of the difficulties that have been witnessed throughout the implementation of the reforms, emphasis has been put on the need for quality education and real progress has been achieved throughout the three stages of the reform towards modernizing the Moroccan educational system so that universities would meet the requirements of the labour market, work on research development, and keep up with the changes imposed by globalization. Global skills are critical to learners' success in their current and future education and workplaces, and in preparing them to become responsible and active members of their communities. Global skills help learners to flourish and achieve lifelong success in an increasingly globalized 21st century world. The most recent set of reforms articulates clearly the urgent need for these global skills when they focus on the advancement of the individual and society; they target teaching competencies such as working effectively in teams, taking an active part in their life and the lives of others around them, and many other competencies for their personal and professional growth. This is to highlight what it means to be a university student who takes responsibility for her/his own learning.

2.6. Higher Education Reform and Language Learning

After 1999, when serious reforms began, the teaching of foreign languages was intended to accompany the opening up of universities according to the Moroccan socioeconomic situation. Foreign language skills are intended to better integrate graduates into the international labour market. The Strategic Vision of Reform (2015-2030) and its global strategy for the education system recommends launching study programs in Arabic, French, and English (Zoulal, 2021). Accordingly, as a part of upgrading the quality of education, English has had a significant position in the Moroccan educational system since it is usually the language of technology, research, and business. For English departments, it must be pointed out with much emphasis, various modifications have taken place, especially as far as the content of courses is concerned to keep up with the requirements of the job market in a highly competitive situation. Introducing "business communications" and "public speaking" are two such examples.

Given the importance of these reforms and the role of autonomy within these reforms, the following study has as a major goal to reveal the perceptions students have towards autonomous behaviour and the activities most likely to foster such behaviour.

2.7. The Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to find out whether students value autonomous learning and whether they are ready to take charge of their own learning. In addition, the study aimed to discover students' attitudes towards and experiences with English language course activities and expectations

intended to foster learner autonomy. Finally, students' perceptions of and experiences with their teachers were also explored through this study, in order to consider future modifications teachers may make to promote learner autonomy and a mode of autonomous learning. Answers to these questions will make clear whether and how Moroccan students are prepared for the shift to autonomous learning. Furthermore, what students report will shed light on what remains to be done within the Moroccan higher education reforms to align with the demands of global competencies and the current needs of the 21st century.

3.   Methodology

To meet these aims, the researcher opted for an online survey so as to gather the maximum amount of data and build a global image about the attitudes and the behaviours adopted by Moroccan university students towards their autonomy. The items the survey relied on were selected and adapted from the review of the literature. The questionnaire of the study was first piloted with 74 third year students to make sure that the questions were clear and understood by the participants. So as to have participants from the same background who have been studying in more or less the same context, the targeted population for the revised survey were English department first and second year university students from Hassan II University.

The questionnaire comprises multiple choice and open-ended questions. The data of the questionnaire was collected anonymously. The survey was distributed within a group of first and second year university students from the English Department. In total, 326 questionnaires were filled out. To have a deeper interpretation of the results, data was processed using measures of central tendency (mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and range); and participants' narrative responses. The questionnaire allowed for self-reported data provided by the learners about their experiences with and attitudes toward autonomy. It addressed these main   areas:

- Whether students value autonomy
- Students' perceived beliefs about and attitudes towards learner autonomy
- The behaviours and the strategies students use in class to foster their autonomy
- Whether and to what extent students perceived the classroom environment (teachers' activities and behaviour, peer work) as fostering learner autonomy

4.   Findings and Discussion

The main concern of this analysis is to depict whether students value autonomous learning and whether they have the willingness to take responsibility for their learning. Then, the actual activities and behaviours reported in classes that are likely to foster autonomy will be dealt with. One last point that will be tackled is an evaluation of the higher education learning environment from an autonomous-supportive viewpoint: findings are presented using measures of central tendency (mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and range; see Table 1) and participants' narrative responses.

4.1.   Students´ Beliefs and Attitudes towards Learner Autonomy

The first issue examined in this survey was the beliefs and attitudes of informants towards "learner autonomy." Generally, participants have a sense of being able to actively participate in their learning (See Table 1).

Table 1

Measures of Central Tendency concerning students´ beliefs and attitudes towards learner autonomy

		I analyse my language learning needs	I determine what specific skills I want to acquire	I select effective learning materials	I ask for help from my peers in class to make my learning more effective	I ask for help from my teacher in class to make my learning more effective	I make realistic plans	I monitor whether my learning is progressing according to my plan	I select criteria to evaluate my learning outcome	I evaluate whether my learning process is effective	I use the newly-acquired knowledge in other contexts
N	Valid	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303
	Missing	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24
Mean		3.98	3.99	3.80	3.31	3.25	3.84	3.73	3.52	3.85	3.88
Median		4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Mode		4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	4
Std. Deviation		.844	.919	.943	1.186	1.195	.960	.956	.996	.920	.945
Range		4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

From the start, most informants consider themselves autonomous learners; about 93% report at the end of the spectrum "always," "usually" and "sometimes" when they have to give feedback on how frequently they think they behave autonomously; fewer informants opted for "never" and "rarely" (7%). Equally, they value autonomous learning, a thing clearly demonstrated in the results of question 2, as most of them view autonomous learning as "very important" (M=2.86; Md= 3; Mo=3; SD=929). This awareness of the importance of such behaviours gets students motivated to behave accordingly and is likely to foster such ability, which is substantiated by their responses to question 3. The majority of participants think they are motivated to take charge of their own learning (M=3.76; Md= 4; Mo=4; SD=929), and are further motivated by their teachers as well (question 8; see figure 1), tendencies that can help them move towards their autonomy since "without motivation, there is no autonomy" (Ushioda, 2006, p. 40).

Figure 1

Do you think your teachers motivate you to be autonomous, to learn content only, or both?

- learn lesson content only
- become autonomous learners only
- learn lesson content and become autonomous learners

52,8%

13,4%

33,9%

More than half of the participants, about 53%, confirm that their teachers help them both learn lessons and become autonomous learners. The teachers seem to play a key role in helping students step further and develop their autonomy. Ossou (2020) reports the readiness of Moroccan EFL teachers to promote learner autonomy to be significantly high. Indeed, teaching with dual goals in mind (i.e., teaching the content and preparing students to act as autonomous agents) is a requirement to meet the 21st century challenges (see, e.g., White & Murray, 2015).

These positive attitudes towards learner autonomy are further enhanced by the participants´ skills to learn independently (question 9; see figure 2).

Figure 2

Do you feel you know how to learn?
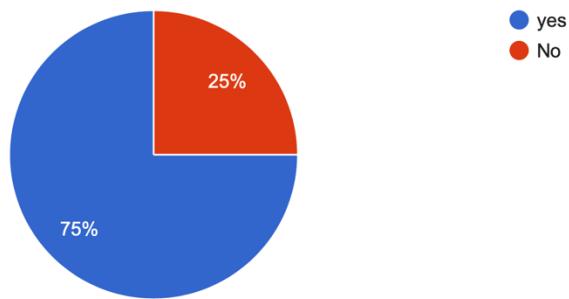
The statistics relating to question 9 suggest that 75% of students have the conviction that they have acquired the skills of knowing how to learn, which is the core of autonomous learning. This confirmation may be due in part to a module some first year students studied during their first semester at university: the course "Learning How to Learn: Powerful Mental Tools" in Coursera. Students' convictions that they know "how to learn" may also be due to the confidence they have developed after more than a year and half of online learning because of the pandemic. This is in line with their answers to question 17, through which they expressed their readiness to learn autonomously: 76.8% are willing to contribute actively in the the learning process (question 17; see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Do you feel you are ready to learn autonomously?
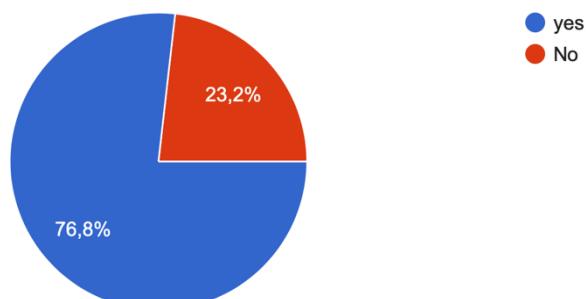
In short, Moroccan university students feel they have an important say concerning what happens in the here and now of the classroom. They not only hold positive attitudes towards the autonomous approach to learning, but they also see themselves as capable of performing autonomous behaviours.

4.2.   Classroom Behaviours Fostering Learner Autonomy

The second concern of the questionnaire attempts to reveal whether learners show behaviors that reflect their academic achievements as well as their independence (see Table 2).

Table 2

Measures of Central Tendency for students´behaviors in class

|		I analyse my language learning needs	I determine what specific skills I want to acquire	I select effective learning materials	I ask for help from my peers in class to make my learning more effective	I ask for help from my teacher in class to make my learning more effective	I make realistic plans	I monitor whether my learning is progressing according to my plan	I select criteria to evaluate my learning outcome	I evaluate whether my learning process is effective	I use the newly-acquired knowledge in other contexts
N	Valid	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303
	Missing	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	24
Mean		3.98	3.99	3.80	3.31	3.25	3.84	3.73	3.52	3.85	3.88
Median		4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Mode		4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	4
Std. Deviation		.844	.919	.943	1.186	1.195	.960	.956	.996	.920	.945
Range		4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

Table 2 displays results concerning the behaviours learners use to promote their autonomy.

On the whole, there is significant evidence of autonomy on the part of the individual (see Table 2). Scoring on the middle and end of the spectrum holds an almost consistent rate of responses. As a case in point, "analysing language needs" and "determining the necessary skills to achieve them" have received the highest mean score (M=3.98, M= 3.99), respectively, which indicates that Moroccan learners are aware of and are willing to take responsibility for their own learning.

This has equally been confirmed by feedback to question 18 (see Figure 4) that indicates that most students have made the decision to be responsible for their own learning. In fact, this is a prerequisite to develop one´s autonomy because "it is impossible to take charge of one's learning without at the same time accepting responsibility for it" (Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017, p. 75).

Figure 4

*Do you want to be responsible for your own learning?*
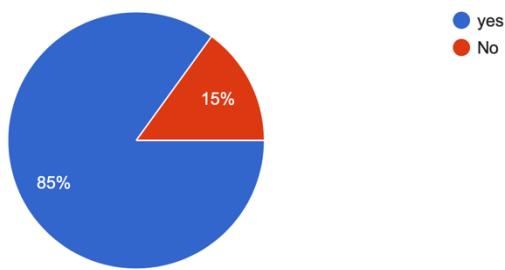
On the other hand, participants are less inclined to utilize their peers´ and teachers´ feedback to make their learning more effective; the two characteristics mentioned in question 20(i), "I ask for help from my peers in class to make my learning more effective" (M=3.31; Mo=3; SD= 1.186); and (ii), "I ask for help from my teacher to make my learning more effective" (M= 3.25; Mo=3; SD=1.195) have received the lowest score mean of all other behaviours in class. These findings join what we have spoken about at the beginning of this discussion: that there is a good foundation upon which autonomous learning can be further fostered in language classrooms in Morocco. Moroccan students have done well as far as their journey towards developing their autonomy. Nevertheless, they still do not avail themselves of the power of their peers nor of that of their teachers to seek help and make their learning more effective. Indeed, a key piece of learner autonomy has not been exercised enough (only about 40% say they usually or always ask their peers for help and slightly less are likely to ask help from their teachers). This may be due to the fact that they are not confident of the roles of others in their autonomy, or simply because of lack of contact imposed by the pandemic since March 2020. This factor is to be further investigated because it influences learners' motivation to learn, as has been stated by Manon, Mercer & Ryan (2015, p. 118): "Motivation comes not only from the activity itself but also from the group of learners, the particular context in which it is taking place, and the personal interpretations of that activity by the individuals involved."

The question that crops up now is how can ´learner autonomy´ be promoted if not all students see the pertinence of peers and teachers to developing such ability, which is "a collective as well as an individual capacity, and its development is stimulated by the social-interactive processes on which effective cooperation between teachers and their learners depends" (Little, Dam & Lengeuhausen, 2017, p. 15), bearing in mind that other contexts substantiate the support such interaction has to the development of students and to the fulfillment of their goals. Mo (2007), for instance, came to the conclusion that peer feedback increased Chinese students´ autonomy in EFL writing.

Noteworthy, too, the survey suggests that fostering autonomy increases students' academic performance, involves students more actively in class, and helps participants develop their critical thinking as well (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Do you think you are an autonomous learner?
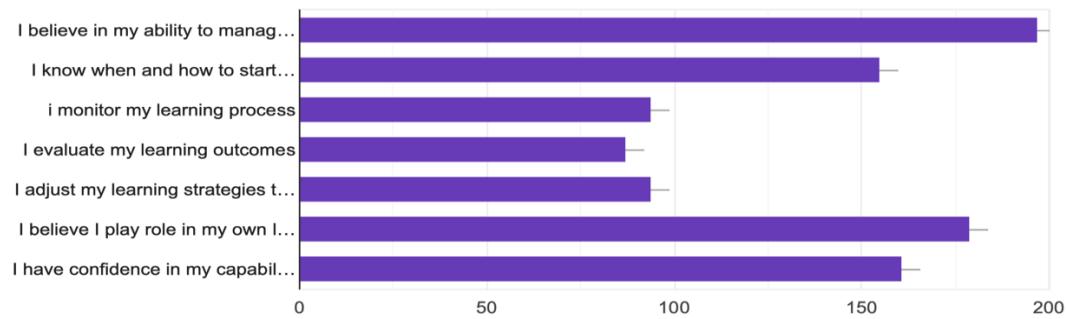
In addition, about 30% of the participants have confirmed their capacity to adjust their learning about strategies to achieve success and better their performance as a result (question 21). Equally, 56.6% of the informants believe they play an active role in their learning; they have shown an ability to set their goals for learning and have worked on monitoring whether the process is effective (M= 3.85) and whether it is progressing according to those set objectives (M= 3.73) so as to arrive at a more advanced level of using the newly acquired knowledge in other contexts (3.88) (see Table 2 above). Thus, students show they "have a say" in their own learning even beyond the classroom since they are applying what they have learnt in the world outside. This joins Dickinson´s definition of autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11).

4.3. The Relevance of the Learning Environment to the Promotion of Learner Autonomy

The third set of questions addresses the learning environment and its suitability for promoting learner autonomy. Focus will be on students' perceptions of modes of teaching, the responsibilities they have in class, and the intervention of their teachers. In response to their feelings about their learning environment, only 24.5% of the informants believe their classroom is learner-centered. This goes hand in hand with the fact that few respondents believe their environment promotes autonomy (23.2%) and few feel their environment (including teachers) encourages them to become actively involved (35.7 %) (question 11; Figure 6).

Figure 6

Students' Perceptions about their Classroom Environments:

Do you feel your classroom environment --------------------?
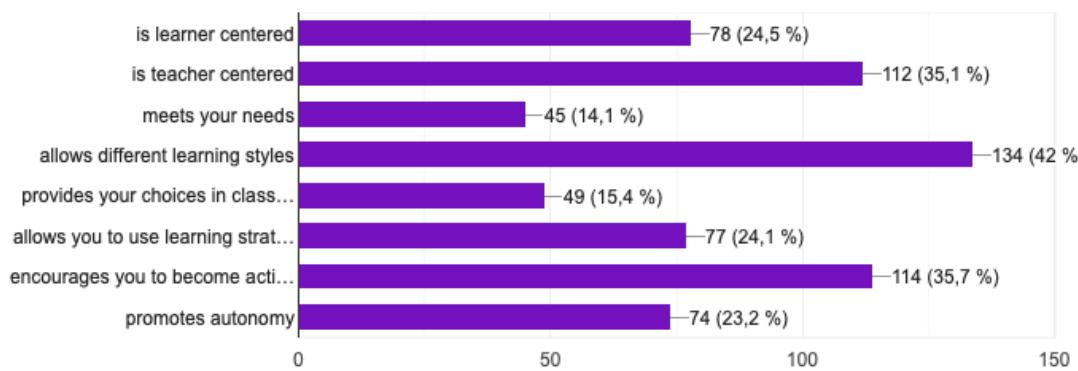
One positive thing to mention here is that 42.5 % confirm that their learning environment is one that allows for different learning styles, which means that some negotiation is taking place since more than one mode and way of thinking is accepted.

Worthy to notice here is that there are some hindrances which likely block the process of developing student autonomy. As a case in point, 36.7% of learners believe their teachers are there to manage the learning experience, which may threaten their autonomy development. More than this, only 17.2 % feel the emotional support of their teachers, which is required to motivate and accompany students in their journey. Boonma (2020, p. 179) claims that teachers need to take on different roles to develop autonomy in classrooms (question 12; Figure 7).

Figure 7

Students' Perceptions about their Teachers' Roles in Class
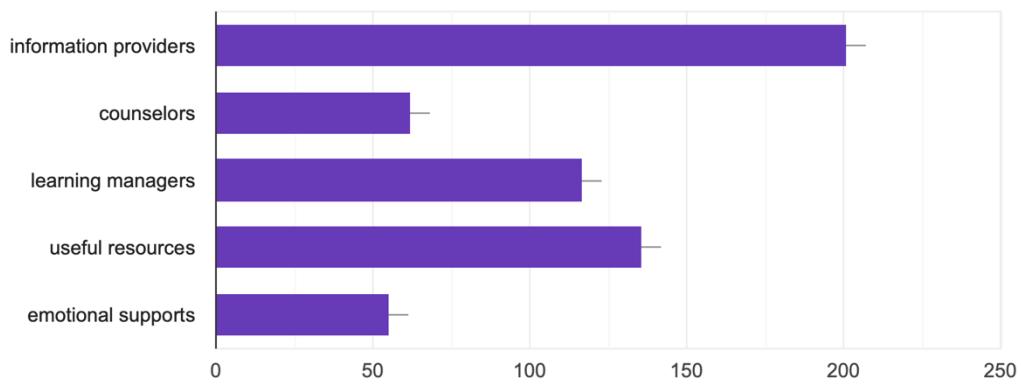
One more reaction that manifests itself in this study is that only 17.2% feel the emotional support of teachers in classes: just 19.4% believe their teachers are counselors or give guidance on personal, social, or psychological problems; not many students feel the psychological support of their teachers. More than this, only 28.8% feel their teachers help them develop their

self confidence (question 13), which implies that we should be more concerned with the psychology of the learner in the Moroccan context. Little (1991) considers this psychological dimension as the heart of learner autonomy. An additional interesting point to emerge from this study relates to student work in class. It is assumed that "in the autonomy classroom, the interactive processes of pair and group work are fundamental to learning success" (Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017, p. 74). Nevertheless, this is not always the case in the Moroccan context.

**Figure 8**

Mode of Work in Classes
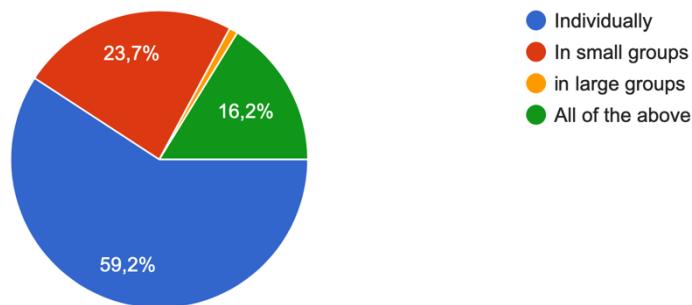
Figure 8 summarises the responses of the students to the mode of studying they mostly use in classes. More than half of the students (59.2%) work individually, which explains the low mean score described earlier as to the interaction with peers. Only 16.2 % of the participants usually work both individually and in groups, and 23.7% take part in interactive and collaborative learning. It is true that within large size classes, group work is not always feasible: this may have been accentuated with the lockdown. Students were not able to meet and work together either in classes or for assignments during this time. In the autonomous learning mode, a lot of cooperation and teamwork are supposed to take place to help learners take control of their learning and profit from peer work and learn from each other (Moe, 2006).

Other questions help decipher other characteristics of the Moroccan learning environment related to autonomy. For instance, students were asked to choose all that apply among many responsibilities they are required to undertake in class (question 19; see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Students' Perceptions about their Responsibilities in Class
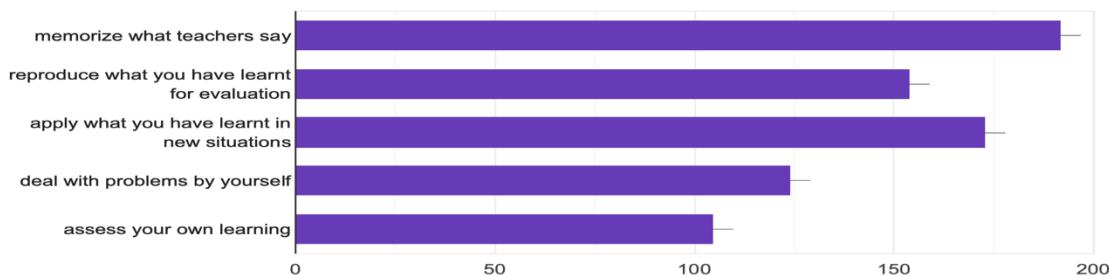
When it comes to responsibilities in class, 60.6% of the students still believe that they have to memorize what their teachers say in classes and accordingly reproduce what they have learnt for evaluation (48.6). Still, 54.6% believe they should be able to use their knowledge in new situations. Only 33.1% think they are able to assess their own learning and 39.1% can deal with problems by themselves, which implies that the approach to the relationship between teacher students and peers is to be revisited for classes to be more learner-centered and oriented towards creating autonomy-supportive activities.

Despite the fact that 92% of the students think they are motivated to take charge of their own learning (question 3), learners must be supported to be able to take this control. They should discover things by themselves, one part of being responsible for their own learning. Doing this will enable them to realize their potential as unique individuals and will enhance their capacity to contribute to the whole process. "Teachers must not only help these learners who do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning, but also first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to train them" (Yu, 2000, pp. 14-15).

Numerous are the behaviors that contribute to fostering learner autonomy. For instance, the availability of new technologies and tools—and the teachers' willingness to engage with these technologies and tools—are expected to both motivate students to work and facilitate learning.

Yet according to Figure 9, technology is not utilized enough in classes. Only about 15% of the students can use their mobile phones to complete classroom tasks. The two traditional methods of learning, namely, "asking for help" and "using dictionaries while doing the task," have received high rates in comparison with other methods: 48.7% and 39.3% respectively. This is further accentuated by the fact that more autonomously-oriented behaviours such as learning without their teachers (20.8%), assessing their own learning (23.3%), and choosing their own assignment (11%) have received lower rates (see question 14, Figure 10), which implies that classrooms have kept some restrictions to the kind of autonomous behaviours they permit.

Figure 10

Students' Perceptions about Activities Allowed in Class
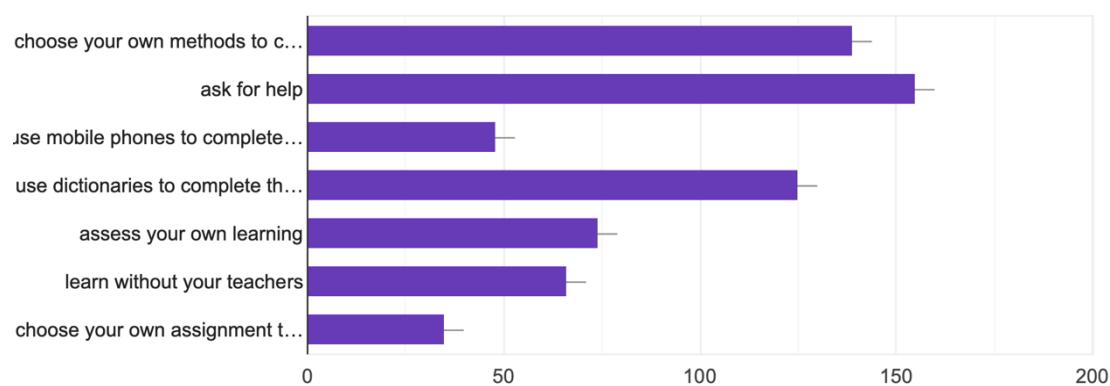
The learning environment ought to allow students to act, take initiative, and have recourse to various strategies and practices to develop their autonomy and become lifelong learners. Here, autonomy will grow in "a growth mindset classroom," which "must be a safe place where students do not feel judged and are free to take intellectual risks" (Ricci, 2013, p. 140). In a word, unless students are motivated to learn, they will fail to develop their autonomy.

The last question of the questionnaire tries to gain a general impression of learners' levels of autonomy by giving them criteria to evaluate themselves and decide for themselves whether or not they are autonomous learners. Answers to this question show that 62.3% believe in their ability to manage their learning, 56.6% believe they play a role in their own learning, and 50.9% have confidence in their capacity to learn, numbers which reflect the positive attitudes students have as far as autonomous learning is concerned. However, having positive attitudes is one thing; putting things into practice is another. Only 29.7% can monitor their learning or can adjust their learning strategies to achieve their goals. Slightly fewer participants are capable of evaluating their learning outcomes (27.5%). This discrepancy between the scores in their beliefs and attitudes and the practices that are expected to foster their autonomy is to be reconsidered, and it underlines the fact that "[l]earners need help to develop their autonomy learning skills" (Yu, 2020, p. 1415). Nevertheless, the survey has confirmed in many instances that they have grasped the importance of autonomy to their personal and professional lives (see question 18 in which 85% of students confirm their desire to be autonomous; see also question 13, where about 60% of the informants believe their teachers help them discover knowledge by themselves, meaning they do inspire them to take control of their learning). Indeed, "the more we encourage our students to research their information and share it with each other, the more independent they will become" (Deller & Price, 2007, p. 113). Overall, the data shows that students do display characteristics that they value autonomous learning and that they are able to be autonomous in their classes.

5.   Conclusion

The current paper, as witnessed through the findings of this study, demonstrates a great potential for cultivating more autonomy in the Moroccan higher education context. This study has limits, of course: we have to admit that measuring learners' autonomy is a complex process since the questionnaire cannot evidence that the abilities autonomous learners have are adequately displayed in their behaviours and are clearly reported in their answers. Furthermore, additional research studies on learner autonomy in the Moroccan higher education context, including classroom observations and topic-oriented interviews, are needed. Nevertheless, the survey has demonstrated a strong relationship between the participants' perceptions of learner autonomy and their behaviour in the university context. The majority of Moroccan University students hold positive attitudes towards learner ́autonomy and most participants have displayed behaviours and practices that can lead to a greater level of learning and that do confirm they are engaged in fostering their autonomy. At the same time, students seem not to exploit interactions with their teachers and peers, which would further develop their autonomy. Both peers and teachers should take on a more prominent position in the learning environment. In addition, then, future research ought to explore how interaction with teachers and peers can be used to forward learners´autonomy.

On the whole, to develop learner autonomy, learners should be empowered to take control of their learning; successful learners think about what they want to achieve and then plan

accordingly (Griffiths, 2015). Equally, it is recommended that tasks inside and outside the classroom should create room for learners´ choices and decision-making about their learning. Clearly, it would be beneficial for teachers to reflect on and develop practices that foster greater learner autonomy.

Acknowledgements

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