
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating Moroccan EFL Students' Perceptions and Engagement in Autonomous Learning

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| ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy has been considered one of the most important factors that can positively affect English language learning. This notion of learner autonomy has become the focus of interest of many researchers. Although many studies have been conducted on learner autonomy, very little is known about learners' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning. This study aims to investigate Moroccan EFL Students' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning. The research employed a questionnaire as a quantitative method to collect data from 60 EFL students at the Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts in Ibn Tofail University. The findings of this study revealed that learners have a positive attitude toward learner autonomy. However, they expressed their tendency to rely on their teachers for their learning.

| KEYWORDS

Learner autonomy - Learner's perceptions and engagement - Language learning

| ARTICLE INFORMATION;

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Introduction

Autonomous learning has become the focus of interest of many educators and researchers in the field of language teaching around the world. According to Benson (2011), "as the theory and practice of language teaching enters a new century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become one of its prominent themes" (p.1). In their turn, Little, Dam, and Legenhausen (2017) claim that for the time being, the teacher's objective when teaching a second and a foreign language is to enhance learners' mastery of communicating in the target language. They believe that when engaging them in communicative use of the target language, such communication must emerge from the learners and address their sense of themselves as well as their interests. Little et al add that when the learners practice and develop their autonomy, they engage in a continuous target language interaction with their classmates and their teacher, and progressively become skillful in the target language. On the other hand, Little (1991) states that learners should be autonomous in all areas of their lives. This makes them good citizens and effective participants. When the learner becomes responsible for his learning, the barriers between learning and living should not emerge.

Statement of the problem

English is considered to be a foreign language that is taught formally in the classroom as a subject to undergraduate students at Ibn Tofail University. What is expected from the curriculum in higher education at this university is to develop students'

fluency in both spoken and written skills. Not only that, but also to foster students' autonomous learning as the class sizes are large and teachers cannot use different instructions to support their students' different needs. However, there is limited information on whether EFL students at Ibn Tofail University engage in autonomous learning or not.

Research objectives and questions

The present study aims to examine EFL Students' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning. To be more precise, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are EFL Students' perceptions regarding learner autonomy?
- 2- What are the autonomous activities that students practice inside and outside the classroom?

Significance of the study

So much research is conducted on the effectiveness of language teaching. However, little is known about students' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning both inside and outside the classroom. Hopefully, the results of this miniature research could provide teachers and material designers with useful information to be considered in planning and selecting the methodology and the techniques of teaching with a view to making students more active and autonomous.

Review of the literature

Learner autonomy has been defined in relation to language learning in a number of ways. Holec defines it as: "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981:3). It is " 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: 11). Benson interprets learner autonomy as: " the capacity to take control of one's own learning " (2011: 58). Little, Dam and Legenhausen (2017) characterize autonomous learners with two features. The first is that learners gradually show responsibility in the classroom through engaging in setting their goals, making choices and decisions, monitoring their progress, and evaluating their outcomes. The second feature relates to learners' practice and the development of their autonomy through continuous interaction with their fellow learners and their teacher. Besides, Little (1991) claims that adult education should look forward to fostering autonomous learning outside the full-time education system to give the learners the opportunity to set precise and unique learning goals for themselves, especially those who are engaged in language learning for professional goals, as they may have different needs. However, autonomous learning does not mean neglecting the role of the teacher in the language learning process. " The development of learner autonomy will depend crucially on the initiatives the teacher takes" Little (1991: 44). The role of the teacher in learner autonomy is summarized by Bound (1988) as helping learners to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to plan and implement independent learning and to assess themselves. This view confirms Voller's (1997) claim, as he mentions that the teacher has an important role in autonomous language learning. He is a facilitator of learning, a counselor to whom learners turn for consultation and guidance, and a resource of information.

Review of empirical studies

Exploring students' perceptions and attitudes toward learner autonomy has interested many researchers.

Abdel Razeq (2014) investigated Palestinian university students' readiness for autonomous learning of English as a foreign language. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather data from 140 students registered in the department of languages and translation at Birzeit University through questionnaires and interviews. This study assessed the learners' readiness across three dimensions: their perceptions of educational responsibilities, their abilities related to autonomous language, and the actual autonomous English activities they were engaged in. The results revealed that learners tend to place the responsibility for their learning on their teachers. However, the participants expressed their willingness to learn autonomously if they were given the opportunity. Concerning the actual English activities, the findings indicated that the students were engaged in both inside and outside classroom activities. The results of the outside-of-class activities revealed that the learners were highly engaged in watching English TV programs, listening to English songs, and activating prior knowledge while studying. The other in-classroom activities, such as making suggestions to the English teacher, had medium means.

Mersevani (2021) examined learners' perceptions and practices related to autonomous language learning in EFL settings. The study used descriptive qualitative methods, including an online questionnaire and interviews, to collect data from two English classes with a total of 64 learners in a private university in Batam. The findings revealed that the learners generally have a positive attitude toward learner autonomy, and most of them are familiar with this notion of learner autonomy. The learners also showed a positive attitude toward understanding teachers' teaching objectives, setting up their own objectives and study plan, and practicing the English language learning autonomously.

Another study by Saeed (2021) was conducted to identify learners' understanding and perceptions to achieve autonomy in the EFL learning context and to find out learners' beliefs on the role of peers, teachers, and social media in achieving autonomy in learning. The study employed a mixed-method approach, including semi-structured interview questions to gather information about the perceptions of 135 EFL learners studying at Dhofar University in Oman. The results revealed that learners were aware of learner autonomy and believed that autonomy would reinforce their self-esteem, confidence, and authority to take control of their learning. The results also showed that learners believe that peers, teachers, curriculum design, and learning technologies like social media could help them foster autonomy.

Rakaj (2021) also explored the perceptions of 92 EFL undergraduate students and 11 professors of learner autonomy in the department of English Language and Literature at the University of Prizen. Two different questionnaires were used by the researcher to collect quantitative data. The findings revealed that both students and professors had a positive attitude toward autonomy in language learning. However, the students expressed their tendency to rely on teachers for their learning. On the other side, the study found that professors showed their willingness to involve students in their own learning and learning objectives and expressed their desire to engage them in making decisions related to their own learning.

In his turn, Duong (2021) reported on an investigation into Vietnamese EFL Students' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning. Data were collected in this descriptive study using a mixed-method research approach design through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview from 50 English-major students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. A difference between students' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning was observed in the findings of this study. The students recognize the importance of autonomy in the process of language learning. However, their perceived level of their abilities inside and outside the classroom was slightly above the average.

Tareen, Zhang, and Haand (2024) investigated how Afghan EFL learners' awareness of autonomous learning and their perceptions of their roles in learning language affect their beliefs and practices in promoting greater autonomy in the context of tertiary education at Kandahar University. This study used a mixed-method approach. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through two instruments, namely a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview instrument for EFL learners. A random sample of 244 EFL learners (male & female) participated in this study from a total population of 693. Meanwhile, nine EFL learners (4 males & 5 females) were selected and invited for individual interviews who learn in the English departments in two faculties at Kandahar University. The findings of the quantitative data revealed that EFL learners had positive perspectives on autonomous learning and were ready to take the initiative in autonomous learning. The qualitative analysis of nine EFL students' interviews indicated that they have to create learning goals for their learning, to assess themselves for controlling their learning, and to take part inside and outside classroom activities to improve their language proficiency.

Methodology

Research design

Instruments

In order to provide answers to the research questions, a questionnaire was used as a quantitative data collection instrument. The questionnaire contains five sections. Four sections covered 11 closed items in the form of a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The last section covered 7 closed items provided with the scale: "always, often, occasionally, rarely, and never". The reason for choosing this kind of questionnaire is due to its quick administration, its ease of preliminary analysis, and the precise responses it yields.

Participants and data collection

This study aimed to investigate Moroccan undergraduate EFL Students' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning. 60 EFL students registered in/ belong to the Department of English Language and Literature at the faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts in Ibn Tofail University participated in this study. Most of their ages range between 18 and 30 years. The collected data have been analyzed using Microsoft Excel to provide numerical data for this present study.

Results

The following tables present the results that were collected from EFL students of IBN Tofail University's Department of English Language and Literature. The analysis of this study was done separately based on five categories. Therefore, the first section presents students' perceptions of learner autonomy. The second section describes Learners' dependence on teachers. The third deals with Students' perceptions of their abilities regarding self-evaluation. The fourth displays learners' engagement in

autonomous activities inside the classroom. Whereas the fifth section tackles learners' engagement in autonomous activities outside the classroom

Table 1: Students' perceptions of their abilities to act autonomously while learning English.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1- I am interested in learning English.	85%	13.3%	1.7%	0%	0%
2- I am able to complete my learning tasks and activities by myself.	35%	35%	13.3%	10%	6.7%
3- I think I should depend on myself in learning English.	54.2%	23.7%	10.2%	6.8%	5.1%

As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of students strongly agree or agree (98.3%) that they believe in their ability to learn English, and only 1.7% state that they are unsure. Regarding the second item, the majority of students (70%) demonstrate that they are able to complete their learning tasks and activities by themselves, 13.3% are unsure, while 16.7% have problems. For the third item, 77.9 % of students are aware that they should depend on themselves in learning English, 10.2% are unsure, and 11.9%% of them strongly disagree or disagree that they should depend on themselves.

Table 2: Learners' dependence on teachers.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Statement 4: I can learn English without a teacher.	5%	10%	23.3%	41.7%	20%
Statement 5: I prefer the teacher to explain the text in the classroom.	65%	25%	3.3%	6.7%	0%
Statement 6: I prefer the teacher to teach everything to me in the classroom.	58.3%	21.7%	8.3%	10%	1.7

The second section explores students' dependence on their teachers. The findings indicate that the majority of students (61.7%) cannot learn English without the teacher, 23.3% are unsure, while only 15% can learn by themselves. This is confirmed in the fifth item when 90% of students strongly agree or agree that they prefer the teacher to explain the text in the classroom, 6.7% disagree, and 3.3% are unsure. Students' dependence on their teachers is clearly visible also through the sixth item, as 80% of students strongly agree or agree that they prefer the teacher to teach them everything in the classroom, whereas only 13.4% strongly disagree or disagree, and 3.3% are unsure.

Table 3: Students' perceptions of their abilities regarding self-evaluation.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Statement 7: I am able to identify my mistakes and weaknesses by myself.	13.3%	10%	43.3%	23.3%	10%
Statement 8: It is my responsibility to evaluate my work for mistakes.	5%	20%	3.3%	46.7%	20%
Statement 9: It is the teacher's responsibility to evaluate my strength and weakness.	60%	23.3%	8.3%	11.7%	1.7%

The third section examines students' perceptions of their abilities regarding self-evaluation. The results reveal that 33.3% are unable to identify their mistakes and weaknesses on their own, 43.3% are unsure, whereas 23.3% can identify them. In addition, the majority of student 66.7% strongly disagree or disagree that it is not their responsibility to evaluate their work for mistakes, 25% state that it is their responsibility, and 3.3% are unsure. Moreover, 83.3% of students strongly agree or agree that it is the teacher's responsibility to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, 13.4% strongly disagree or disagree, and 8.3% are unsure.

Table 4: Learners' engagement in autonomous activities inside the classroom.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Statement 10: I can set my learning objectives.	28.3%	43.3%	8.3%	16.7%	5%
Statement 11: I am able to select learning materials for my study and homework.	11.7%	35%	15%	21.7%	16.7%

The fourth section addresses Learners' engagement in autonomous activities inside the classroom. The results indicate that 71.6% can set their learning objectives, while 21.7% cannot, and 8.3% are unsure. Regarding the selection of learning materials, 46.7% can select them for their study and homework, 38.4% are not able to, and 15% are unsure.

Table 5: Learners' engagement in autonomous activities outside the classroom.

Statement	Always	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Statement 12: I study English outside the class on my own.	36.7%	41.7%	8.3%	6.7%	6.7%
Statement 13: I make notes and summaries by myself after the class.	48.3%	25%	8.3%	13.3%	5%
Statement 14: I attend the English extracurricular activities.	10%	10%	40%	31.7%	10%
Statement 15: I read English books, novels, newspaper, magazines...etc, outside the classroom.	8.3%	13.3%	28.3%	35%	15%
Statement 16: I watch English TV programmes and movies.	36.7%	45%	11.7%	6.7%	0%
Statement 17: I listen to English songs.	41.7%	40%	8.3%	6.7%	3.3%
Statement 18: I communicate with foreign friends in English using social media.	33.3%	35%	18.3%	8.3%	5%

The last section deals with Learners' engagement in autonomous activities outside the classroom. The findings show that most respondents (78.4%) demonstrate that they always or often study English outside the class on their own, 13.4% rarely or never, whereas 8.3% occasionally. Concerning notes and summaries, 73.3% make them themselves after the class, 18.3% rarely or never make them on their own, and 8.3% make them occasionally. Moreover, 41.7% of students indicate that they rarely or never attend English extracurricular activities, 40% of them attend them occasionally, whereas only 20% always or often attend them. Half of the students (50%) assert that they rarely or never read English books, novels, newspapers, magazines, etc, outside the classroom; only 21.6% read them, 28.3% read them occasionally, and 21.6% always or often read them. In addition, the majority of students, 81.7% always or often watch English TV programmes and movies, 11.7% occasionally watch them, and 6.7% rarely watch them. Further, most students (81.7%) listen to English songs, 8.3% occasionally, and 10% rarely or never listen to them. Additionally, more than half of the students (68.3%) always or often communicate with foreign friends in English using social media, 18.3% of them occasionally, and 13.3% rarely or never communicate with them.

Discussion

As shown in the results of this study, the learners' responses show a positive attitude towards learner autonomy in language learning. This finding is consistent with those of previous research (e.g., Mersevani (2021), Rakaj (2021), and Tareen, Zhang, and Haand (2024) which concluded that EFL students perceived learner autonomy as important to their language learning. The

importance of learner autonomy is confirmed by Little (1991) as who states that learners should be autonomous in all areas of their lives. This makes them good citizens and effective participants. However, a large proportion of students in this study expressed their tendency to rely on their teachers as they prefer the teacher to teach them everything in the classroom. This finding is similar to Rakaj (2021)'s finding in which students tend to relay on their teachers for their language learning; while, it contradicts with one of the principles of autonomous learning stated by Dickinson (1987) as he says that "people who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught".

Regarding self-evaluation, the results reveal that most students believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This finding does not align with Tareen, Zhang, and Hand (2024) 's finding which indicated that students emphasized their responsibility to assess themselves for controlling their language learning. Related to learners' engagement in autonomous activities inside the classroom, most of them can set their learning objectives. This finding is consistent with Mersevani (2021) and Tareen, Zhang, and Hand (2024)'s finding which showed that students engage in creating learning goals for their learning. Showing responsibility in the classroom through engaging in setting their goals is one of the characteristics of autonomous learners set by Logenhausen (2017). Still, half of the participants in this study expressed their inability to select learning materials for their study. This finding does not reflect the characteristics of an autonomous learner as one who has control over the content of learning, the goals and purposes of learning, and the learning management Benson (2001). An autonomous learner is also described by Dam (1995) as "a learner qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently

chooses aims and purposes and sets goals, chooses materials, methods, and tasks" p. 1

On the other hand, the researcher has found that learners engage in autonomous activities outside the classroom, such as watching English TV programs and movies, listening to English songs, and communicating with foreign friends using English on social media. This finding is compatible with Tareen, Zhang, and Hand (2024)'s finding, in which learners stressed the need to take part inside and outside classroom activities to improve their language learning.

Conclusion

This study investigated EFL Students' perceptions and engagement in autonomous learning at Ibn Tofail University. The results revealed that EFL students acknowledged the importance of autonomous learning to the development of their language learning. However, their implementation of autonomous learning was unsatisfactory. They show dependence on their professors as they consider the teacher responsible for teaching them everything in the classroom and for assessing their language learning. This shows their inability to take responsibility and control their learning due to their unfamiliarity with the concept of learner autonomy. Therefore, it is recommended to raise students' awareness about the importance of learner autonomy in language learning. This could be achieved by integrating autonomous learning into EFL curricula and involving learners in decision-making related to their own learning

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