Exploring University EFL students' Readiness for Learner Autonomy: A Quantitative Approach

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Abstract

The past few decades have seen a growing recognition of the importance of assuming responsibility for one's learning. Indeed, there is an emerging consensus that the university model needs to equip learners with the necessary skills that will set them up for taking control over their learning and therefore compete in this world of dynamism. However, in the local context, scant attention has been given to how autonomy is perceived and how ready students are to assume it. The present paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating university students' perceived level of readiness for autonomy in their learning. Accordingly, 107 students majoring in English completed questionnaires at a university. The items of the questionnaire were arranged on a five-point Likert-scale continuum. Students were non-randomly selected and voluntarily completed all the items of the questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS software. Findings of the study indicated that the majority of EFL students appear to be ready to be autonomous in their learning. The highest percentage pertaining to the levels of agreement responses was manifested in the students' tendency to set their own learning goals. Moreover, the Independent-samples t-test showed that there were no statistically significant differences between males and females. Some recommendations for EFL teachers were also discussed.

Keywords: Autonomy models, goal-setting, learner autonomy, university EFL learners

Introduction

To keep abreast of the demands of the twenty-first century society, people need to be lifelong learners. This requires that education foster individuals who will be able to manage their own affairs by themselves. Similarly, as English language teaching (ELT, henceforth) enters a new century, the shortcomings of the traditional approaches that deemed the learner as the receiver of knowledge from the teacher led to theory and practice that provided the rationale for more learner-centred approaches. Amidst and beyond this change, a body of research has been conducted on the issue of promoting autonomous learners (Benson, 1997; Cotterall, 2000; Creswell, 2000; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1997; Nunan, 1997; Ouakrime, 1988; Oxford, 2008; Rivers, 2001; Rodrigues, 2003; Sheerin, 1997; Smith, 2008; Voller, 1997, among others). More recently, the issue has continued to be prominent as manifested in the increasingly subsequent literature (Benson & Lamb, 2021; Oxford, 2017; Pawlak, 2017; Phan, 2021; Reinders, 2021; Tassinari, 2018). Therefore, as a result of these fast-paced changes in the field of ELT, the teacher's roles have changed from those which labeled him as the model, the sole authority and "a purveyor of knowledge or wielder of power" (English Guidelines for Moroccan Secondary Schools, 2007, p. 50) to a catalyst, facilitator, and guide (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005). This resulted in promoting learner autonomy (Knowles et al., 2015; Littlewood, 1997; Nunan, 2003).

Central to the notion of learner autonomy is the idea that some, in the beginning, thought of it as a western concept that can be cultivated in the western schools only. This, however, falls short of support, as there is a common agreement that autonomy, as an educational goal, is "cross-culturally valid" (Smith, 2008, p. 396). In fact, in the Moroccan context, following a number of reforms at the general policies and educational levels (National Charter of Education and Training, 1999; Strategic Vision, 2015-2030; Framework Law 51-17, 2019), learner autonomy appears to be encouraged and is considered as one of the ultimate goals of education. Indeed, students at the university level should become autonomous learners because at this phase, they have become learners who should be characterized by self-directing their learning (Merriam, 2018). Essentially, they should be able to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify learning materials, use effective learning strategies, and eventually assess their learning (Knowles, 1975). Accordingly, the question that might be addressed is whether learners are ready to assume responsibility for their learning. Hence, the present paper purports to investigate the extent to which Moroccan university EFL learners are ready to become autonomous in their learning.

Over the past few decades, there has been a worldwide renaissance of interest in autonomy in language teaching and learning. It has certainly acquired eminence in second language teaching and learning since the 1980s. This is manifested in the increasingly diverse literature wherein researchers have provided a number of definitions and descriptions of this concept which has become an educational goal (Benson, 2011; Littlewood, 1997; Ouakrime, 1988). The development of autonomy also appeared in a number of language teaching methodology books and chapters (Burns, 2010; Goodwyn & Branson, 2005; Ur, 1999; Woodward, 2009). The advocates of autonomy state that it is a prerequisite for effective learning to take place, and, when developed, it promotes good language learners who will assume more responsibility for their learning (Benson, 2011; Dam, 2008; Little, 1991, 2007; Manchon, 2008; Nunan, 2003; Pawlak, 2017). This increasing interest of researchers in autonomy yielded a wide range of definitions of the concept as well as its models

to delineate what has mistakenly been associated with different misconceptions and therefore devise effective techniques that would help promoting it.

Definitions of learner autonomy

A number of definitions of what autonomy is, and what it does not entail has been put forward by a number of researchers from different perspectives. For example, Little (2007, p. 14), citing Holec (1981), defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". In fact, this definition could be considered as the most "universally accepted" one and it is the most cited in the related literature (Benson, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 1991, 2007, among others). According to Pichugova et al.'s (2016), they view that Holec in his definition points to the responsibility concerning determining objectives, having a choice over the content to be studied, selecting learning strategies as well as evaluating one's learning. Little (1991) shares the same point with these researchers arguing that this responsibility, as indicated by Holec, is concerned with decisions to be taken with respect to learning aspects, including:

- determining the objectives;

- defining the contents and progressions;

- selecting methods and techniques to be used;

- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);

- evaluating what has been acquired (Little, 1991, p. 7).

Meanwhile, this concept of autonomy has been defined in different ways. Little (1991) defines it as a "*capacity* for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4). This capacity implies that "the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" (p. 4). Rather than indicating full independence from the teacher's control, this researcher argues that the teacher-learner relationship should be interdependent, because total detachment usually results in individuals being autistic learners who will deprive themselves from social interaction. Pennycook (1997) suggests that autonomy is essentially about "the struggle to become the author of ones' own world" (p. 39). Similarly, Macaro (1997) considers autonomy as the ability that is acquired through knowing *how* to make decisions about the self as well as being *allowed* to make those decisions. More recently, Little (2007) points to a significant shift of emphasis in defining learner autonomy from something learners do on their own to things they do "for themselves" (p. 14).

Models of learner autonomy

Following the increasingly diverse literature on autonomy, a number of researchers (Benson, 2011; Macaro, 1997, 2008; Nunan, 1997; Oxford, 2003; Tassinari, 2012, among others) have devised various models that summarise the essential components of the concept, but the two influential ones appear to be those of Benson (2011) and Tassinari (2012). Indeed, the discussion on learner autonomy suggests that it is a complex concept, a "construct of constructs" which encompasses a set of dimensions (Tassinari, 2012, p. 28). According to Benson (2011), in order to arrive at an adequate depiction of autonomy, three dimensions should be included, namely "learning management, cognitive processes and learning content" (p. 61), all of which represent learner's control over learning. It is worthwhile noting that these dimensions are interdependent; self-management is affected by the kind of the cognitive processes involved in learning, which likewise affect learning management,

and these two dimensions should be, in turn, engaged in the choice of the learning content.

Tassinari (2012) proposes a more elaborated model comprised of a set of components represented as follows:

- a cognitive and metacognitive component i.e., possessing cognitive and metacognitive knowledge regarding one's learning;

- an affective and a motivational component i.e., dealing with one's feelings and motivating oneself;

- an action-oriented component i.e., decision making;

- a social component i.e., cooperation with others (p. 28).

Each dimension covers a set of descriptors that are further divided into 'can-do' statements.

In total, there are 118 descriptors that are divided into 33 macro-descriptors further divided into 85 micro-descriptors: all these represent indicators of autonomous language learning. Following this researcher, a balance among these four broad dimensions is indeed a characteristic of learner autonomy, and they represent a set of "learners' competencies, skills, and decision-making processes" (p. 28). Her model of autonomy appears to be unique as it is both structurally dynamic in that the underlying descriptors are all interrelated, and functionally dynamic in that learners may begin to engage in any component without following any given order. The non-linearity of this model is in itself an essential characteristic that helps account for the ensuing complexity of learner autonomy (Tassinari, 2018).

The importance of learner autonomy

As early as the 1970s, self-directed learners were reported to be proactive and motivated learners who take the initiative in their learning (Knowles, 1975; Rubin, 1975). Indeed, learner autonomy has been deemed an essential goal of education (Benson, 2011; Knowles, 1980; Littlewood, 1997; Ouakrime, 1988). Subsequently, advocates of autonomy (Benson, 2011; Dam, 2008; Little, 1991; Manchon, 2008; Nunan, 2003; Pawlak, 2017; Pennycook, 1997) argue that it is a prerequisite for successful language learning to take place. For example, Benson (2011) views that autonomous language learners are theoretically supposed to be good language learners, and autonomy, in fact, increases their level of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). Similarly, Sheerin (1997) contends that effective language learning requires that learners assume responsibility for their learning and that they engage in the decisions affecting the learning process. In addition, autonomous language learning involves the selection and use of a number of learning strategies that help learners cope with their learning effectively (Brown, 2000; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cohen, 2010; Griffiths, 2015; Knowles, 1975; Nhem, 2019; Oxford, 1990, 2001; Nguyen & Gu, 2013; Sturtridge, 1997).

Previous research

A host of studies has been conducted on the similar issue in other EFL contexts. Saeed (2021) carried out a study on university students' readiness for autonomy and concluded that his participants displayed a high degree of readiness and positive perceptions. However, studies carried conducted in other EFL contexts (Alrabia, 2017; Alzubi, et al., 2017; Bekleyen & Selimoglu, 2016; Hozayen, 2011) found that their respondents were identified to have a low level of autonomy readiness in their learning and, thus, were teacher-dependent. Yet another strand of studies found that while students showed some autonomous orientations, they often tended to accept the sole authority of the teacher. For example, Senbayrak et al. (2018) conducted an

exploratory study on students' readiness for autonomy and their attitudes toward self-access centers and found out that "Turkish EFL students were ready to take responsibility for their own learning despite their strong tendency to accept the teacher's power and authority in the learning process" (pp. 11-12). The gender variable in these studies was either not significant or was not considered as a variable at all. All these studies and others have an important implication which is that teachers should work out to promote autonomy in their students.

Since autonomy allows learners to take control over their learning, the purpose of this study is to explore their perceived readiness for autonomy based on their responses to a number of aspects of autonomous learning. Accordingly, the study sets out to answer the following main question:

1. Are Moroccan EFL students ready to assume autonomy in their learning?
2. Are there any statistically differences between the mean scores of males and females?

Method

This section presents the research approach adopted in this study and the procedures followed to answer the research question. Precisely, it will state the research approach, the participants and the type of the sampling technique, the instrument, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

The research design and approach

The design employed in this study is a descriptive one; it is applied by quantitatively generating data, using a self-completion questionnaire. The quantitative approach involves the collection of numerical data, entails the deductive testing of theory, and it adheres to the post-positivist philosophical assumptions (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014). This is taken into consideration while conducting the study.

The participants and the sampling strategy

The targeted population is Moroccan University EFL students at the school of Arts and Humanities, affiliated to Moulay Ismail University, Morocco. 107 participants completed the questionnaires, among these participants, 55% (n=59) are males and 45% (n=48) are females. The participants were non-randomly selected, adhering to the rules of this type of sampling strategy. In fact, with respect to non-random sampling, Bryman (2012) argues that it increases the likelihood of a good response rate; indeed, the number of the questionnaires returned for the present study was high.

The instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect data for the present study, and there is a number of reasons justifying choosing such an instrument over other data collection techniques. For example, the questionnaire allows one to collect data from large samples of participants from various settings. In fact, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) argue that this instrument is highly flexible in the sense that it can be administered to different people in different sites. Similarly, the questionnaire is more convenient for the participants to respond to usually without being in haste (Walliman, 2011). It is also cheaper and quicker to administer and, therefore, reduces the tendency of the respondents to exhibit social desirability bias as it can be answered without necessarily the researcher being present (Bryman, 2012).

The questionnaire used in the present study is divided into two main sections. The first one concerns the demographic characteristics of the respondents, namely their gender and age, and the second one, which used the scale designed by Orakci and

Gelisli (2017), deals with their readiness for autonomy in their learning. While the first section contained two questions, the second one is composed of 14 descriptors to which the participants responded on a five-point Likert scale, sequentially ranging between options of "strongly disagree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", and "strongly agree". Following some researchers such as Converse and Presser (1986) and Wallima (2011), the questionnaire is fairly short and written in a way that ensures the understanding of the items by the respondents so as to avoid any likelihood of overburdening them. Also, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured through Cronbach's Alpha, the commonly employed statistical procedure (Bryman, 2012; Loewen & Plonsky, 2016; Perry, 2005; Rasinger, 2010), and was found to be 0.81, which indicates, according to Bryman (2012) and Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), an acceptable level of reliability.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Before conducting the study, the questionnaire was piloted on 13 students similar to the intended sample since piloting is a crucial stage in any data collection involving surveys (Bryman, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Rasinger, 2013). While piloting, cognitive interviews were conducted with the piloted group as they were completing the survey in order to check for the likelihood of any complex or ambiguous questions. The participants did not experience any difficulty understanding the survey items.

After having successfully piloted the study, and having clearly disclosed its purpose, the final version of the questionnaire was administered to the participants who voluntarily gave their consent to take part, ensuring them that their identity would be kept anonymous. The data were then analyzed using both Microsoft Excel and SPSS 'version 20'. Starting with the background information, or what is called 'factual questions' (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010), of the participants, the frequency of their gender was calculated alongside their age range (20-24; 25-28; more than 28). Descriptive statistics were used to examine the students' readiness level of autonomy. The following section will report on the findings of the study. The scale item analysis followed Benson's (2016) description of the attained results. That is, the degrees of agreement or disagreement were analyzed to show the exact extent to which learners were ready to assume autonomy for their learning, because averaging the results into the statistical means would not otherwise indicate this. However, this averaging was only done to examine learner autonomy across gender groups. To see if there are any significant differences between the mean scores of both males and females, Independent-samples t-test were run. The following section will report on the findings of the study.

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Results

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Demographic characteristics

The number of the participants consists of 59 males and 48 females, they have been categorised into three groups according to their age between 20 and 23 years old (Group 1), between 24 and 28 (Group 2) and above 28 years (Group 3). These gender and age frequencies are shown in charts 1 and 2 below, respectively.
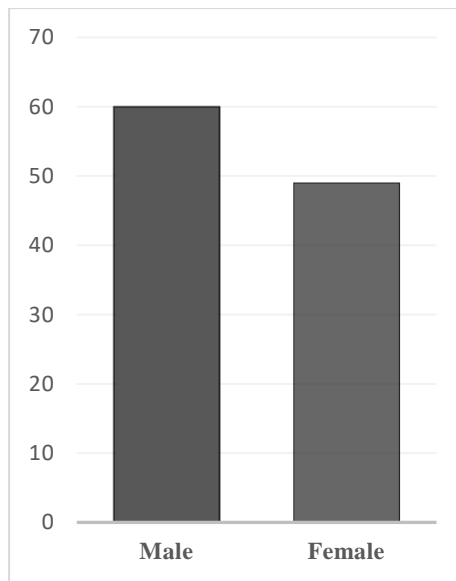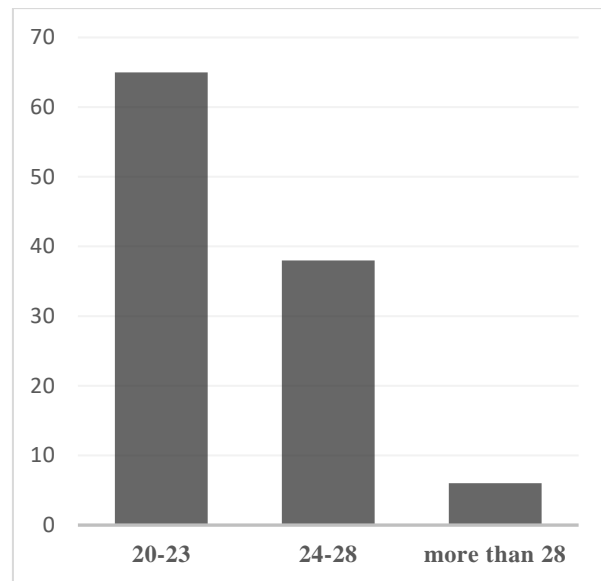
Chart 1: Gender frequency

Chart 2: Age frequency

Descriptive statistics for students' readiness for autonomy

Table 1. Learners' level of readiness for autonomy

Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
1. I can set my learning goals for me.	2.8	6.4	7.2	58.9	24.8
2. I can learn with and from others (e.g. fellow learners, teachers, etc.).	3.7	8.3	6.4	40.5	42.2
3. I can see what prevents me from completing a task and deal with it accordingly.	1.8	11.0	18.3	58.7	10.1
4. I can use effective time management for learning.	2.8	13.8	22.9	37.6	23.0
5. I can identify my strengths and weaknesses while learning English.	1.8	5.5	11.9	46.8	33.9
6. I can select and use different materials and resources to study English at home.	3.7	5.5	9.2	40.4	41.3
7. I know the Websites and online resources that are useful for my learning.	4.6	6.4	21.9	28.5	26.6
8. I encourage myself to speak in English even though I am afraid to make mistakes.	4.6	9.2	9.2	37.6	39.4
9. I can motivate myself (in a way relevant to me) for my learning.	4.6	3.7	13.8	46.8	31.2
10. I know the method and strategy which suit me best and use them.	2.8	16.5	20.2	39.4	21.1
11. I can determine my own learning needs.	3.7	11.9	18.3	51.4	14.7
12. I can evaluate my progress in English by myself	8.3	24.8	21.1	30.3	15.6
13. I would like to have a say in the choice of activities.	3.7	6.4	23.9	45.0	21.1
14. I do not try to improve my weaknesses.	32	33	9.3	15.6	10.1

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

The results displayed in the above table indicate that the majority of EFL students' level of readiness appears to be satisfying. This is manifested in the substantially higher percentages obtained throughout the items with respect to agreement responses. Concerning item one, a significant number of the participants agree (58.9%) or strongly agree (24.8%) that they can set learning goals for themselves; only a small number of participants disagree (6.4%) or strongly disagree (2.8%). Regarding item two, the participants agree (40.5%) or strongly agree (42.2%) that they can learn with and from others, be it their colleagues or teachers. Over half of the respondents agree (58.7%) or strongly agree (10.1%) that they can identify what prevents them from completing a given task and deal with it accordingly. Concerning item four, more than half of the participants agree (37.6%) or strongly agree (23.0%) that they can use effective time management for their learning.

Moreover, the results show that the majority of the participants either agree (46.8%) or strongly agree (33.9%) that they can identify their strengths and weaknesses while learning English; very few respondents, however, disagree (5.5%) or strongly disagree (1.8%). According to the item which elicits whether they can select and use different materials and resources to study English at home, 40.4% agree or strongly agree, with again a low percentage (9.2%) pertaining to the disagreement levels. In response to item seven, more than half of the participants agree (30.5%) or strongly agree (26.6%) that they know the Websites and online resources that are useful for their learning. Similarly, results of item eight present that a significant number of the participants agree (37.6%) or strongly agree (39.4%) that they encourage themselves to speak in English. Regarding item nine, a large number of the participants agree (46.8%) or strongly agree (31.2%) that they can motivate themselves in a way relevant to them for their learning, while very few of them are identified to disagree (3.7%) or strongly disagree (4.6%).

Results from item ten demonstrate that a quite significant number of the participants agree (39.4%) or strongly agree (21.1%) that they know the method and strategy which suit them best and use them. Also, more than half of the participants agree (51.4%) or strongly agree (14.7%) that they can determine their own learning needs, whereas only a small number of them disagree (11.9%) or strongly disagree (3.7%). Concerning their readiness to evaluate their progress in English by themselves, a lesser percentage is obtained; that is, few of the participants agree (30.3%) or strongly agree (15.6%), with almost the same number disagreeing (24.8%) or strongly disagreeing (8.3%) with the statement. With regard to statement thirteen, a significant number of the participants agree (45%) or strongly agree (21.1%) that they would like to have a say in the choice of activities. Finally, given the reversed coded item, a large number of the participants disagree (32.1%) or strongly disagree (32.1%) with the fact that they do not try to improve their weaknesses, which means that a total of 65% of the participants in fact do the reverse.

Autonomy across gender groups

To run the independent-samples t-test, the results of the survey were averaged to summarise the mean scores for both groups. The following table presents the descriptive statistics on the gender factor.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on gender

Gender	Mean	SD
Male	3.73	.63
Female	3.64	.43

As can be seen in the table above, the average of autonomy level achieved by males (*M* = 3.73) is only slightly higher than that achieved by females (M = 3.64).

In order to examine whether there are any statistically differences between both groups' mean scores, Independent-samples t-test was run as follows:

Table 3. Independent-samples t-test for autonomy across gender

| | T-test for equality means | | | |
	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Equal variances assumed	107	.43	.08372	.10670

Table 3 shows that the difference between males and females in relation to assuming autonomy for their learning is not insignificant (p = .43), a value that is bigger than the norm (p = 0.05). This means that the current study failed to reject the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between males and females in relation to how autonomous they are.

Having described the results of the study, the following section discusses the findings by highlighting the most rated aspects of autonomous learning as well as discussing them in relation to other studies' findings in other EFL/ ESL contexts.

Discussion

Based on the findings obtained in this study, it appears that EFL students' level of autonomy readiness is generally significantly high. It has been found that the highest percentage, adding the two levels of agreement (83.7%), has been manifested in the students' tendency to set their own goals. This is in accordance with Tin's (2012) study of EFL students who are found to be engaged in setting goals for their learning as the highest rated aspect. In Nunan's (1997) five levels of autonomy implementation, '*creation*' is considered as an equally important level at which learners create and set their own leaning goals, a fact that is demonstrated by the participants. Moreover, according to little (1995), learner autonomy does not indicate a total detachment from one's peers or teachers. In fact, in the present study, it has been found that the level of students' learning with and from others appeared to be the second highest rated aspect (82.8%). The present study also concluded that there are not statistically significant differences between males and females as to their readiness level for autonomy.

Regarding their ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses, students reported a high level of agreement with a percentage of 80.7%, a finding which is congruent with Hayta and Yaprak's (2013) study in which their participants displayed a mean score above average for the same item. Contrary to these results, studies carried out in other EFL contexts (Alrabia, 2017; Alzubi et al., 2017; Bekleyen & Selimoglu, 2016; Hozayen, 2011) found that their respondents were identified to have a low level of autonomy readiness in their learning and, thus, were teacher-dependent. Another related aspect of autonomy readiness is the ability to evaluate ones' own learning with which a lesser percentage of the participants (45.9%) agreed, thereby making it the lowest rated item. Almost a similar finding is found in Chan et al. (2002) study in which 71% of the participants regarded their teachers as mainly responsible for evaluating their learning.

Another equally important aspect of learner autonomy is motivation (Orakci & Gelisli, 2017; Tassinari, 2018), which has been found to be enhanced by the participants to a large extent. Mainly, 78% have reported that they could motivate themselves in their quest for learning. Generally, the rated levels are compatible across the items.

For example, item 5 "I can identify my strengths and weaknesses while learning English," and item 11 "I can determine my own learning needs" have received agreement rates of 80.7% and 66.1%, respectively. These two items are compared because they are interrelated; that is, if students are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, they can also determine their learning needs. All in all, reflecting on these findings, it could be concluded that the participants have shown a high level of autonomy readiness.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore Moroccan University EFL students' readiness with regard to their perceived level of autonomous learning. The descriptors, as already discussed, have been devised in such a way as to tap into learners' autonomy readiness level. The majority of these items were formulated as the 'can-do' statements through which learners can assess their competencies and behaviours. In fact, the questionnaire items may also serve as a diagnostic test for teachers to get insights into their students' autonomy level, and accordingly help their learners assume responsibility for their learning.

Overall, Moroccan EFL students' autonomy in learning reached a satisfactory level. The tendency of the students is more directed to setting learning goals for themselves with a percentage of 82.6% of the participants who showed agreement. Indeed, the majority opted for either agree or strongly agree with all the questionnaire items, except for the one that was negatively worded (I do not try to improve my weaknesses), with which most respondents disagreed, indicating that the participants' ratings were conclusive along the statement items. However, it should be noted that the findings of the present study should not mark the end of the inquiry; in other words, although a significant number of students have demonstrated their readiness be autonomous, there are others who have not yet stepped forward in this respect.

Given all this state of affairs, it is imperative that teachers raise their students' awareness of the importance of autonomy and involve them in the decision making concerning the activities to be carried out inside the classroom. Teachers also need to use those autonomy descriptors as a checklist to keep track of their learners' readiness for assuming responsibility for their learning. Moreover, since learner autonomy manifests itself in different degrees and is perceived differently in different contexts, and since it is still unclear how learners and teachers would respond to the changing roles in the Moroccan EFL classes, more research on autonomy should be undertaken. Most importantly, autonomy training should be carried out to effectively implement a working model of autonomy in the hope that university learners take control over their learning.

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