

## The Role of Web Technologies in Promoting Learner Autonomy among EFL University Students

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**Abstract**

*Technological advancements have brought about several environmental, economic and social challenges for the entire world. Nevertheless, no one can deny that these forces have offered infinite opportunities for progress and development for humanity. The digital revolution has dramatically affected many domains such as work and education. Perhaps one of the main aspects of this revolution in education is online learning which allows students to easily access resources and self-direct their learning. The current paper attempts to examine the role of using Web technologies in fostering learners' autonomy. It also aims to explore students' experiences with online learning and how they perceive its relevance to the enhancement of autonomous abilities. To attain these objectives, a mixed-method approach is adopted to collect data utilizing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The participants are Moroccan university students in the English departments, and data is analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results show that the participants display high levels of autonomous behaviours as students value their experiences with online learning. The findings also indicate that most students are willing to be more responsible for their own learning when using online platforms that offer, flexibility, interaction, and interesting autonomous practices of language learning.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

With technological advances, learners are offered ample opportunities to become more responsible for their learning by engaging in online activities that allow students to conduct various learning tasks independently. These changes in learning modes have altered the traditional roles of both teachers and learners with a shift to more learner-centred methods of learning and teaching. Using technology in education also increases pedagogical interaction and varies the process of learning and teaching (Borova et al., 2021). This means that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) assist students in developing various skills through the exercise of a variety of activities such as consulting limitless resources and communicating with teachers and peers. These innovative technologies provide a wide range of choices making the learning process more advantageous for the instructors and more interesting for learners. In addition, the use of ICT offers students numerous chances to manage their time effectively as they can easily carry out their tasks anywhere and anytime. Thus, the role of instructors within this shift of teaching modes is to guide learners to acquire knowledge and empower them with the necessary tools to become autonomous learners.

The spread of COVID-19 has urged educational systems around the globe to adopt online education to guarantee the continuity of learning despite the lockdown caused by the pandemic. The consequences of such issues have made educational institutions extensively adopt the use of ICT and online learning in their curricula, which shows that there is a need for digitalization in education to face global challenges. According to Ossiannilsson (2020, p. 88), “online education will be a strategic priority in every institution. A sustainable society requires access to digital platforms and the promotion of flexibility in learning to help our students grow and develop.” This indicates that the tendency of education in this era is to offer opportunities for flexible learning to cater to the student’s needs and help them flourish. In other words, more flexible learning modes are needed to respond to the great demand of pursuing higher education in light of the wide use of technology to allow learners to self-direct their learning and assume more responsibility. With this in mind, a study investigating how web technology-mediated settings enhance autonomy among language learners is insistently needed as there is a dearth of studies that examine how self-initiated use of online education, in the Moroccan EFL context, assists learners to achieve successful language learning outcomes and develop their autonomy. Hence, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do EFL university students believe web technologies enhance their autonomy?
2. In what ways does online learning foster the development of learner autonomy among EFL university students?

The findings of the study can offer insights into how learner autonomy development is fostered within online settings and provide a better understanding of the main factors influencing autonomy in these environments. Specifically, the findings can be used for more useful implementation of online learning through the provision of pedagogical implications that could allow learners to develop autonomous learning skills and effectively manage their learning process.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Online Learning and Digital Transformation of Education**

The integration of ICT in education has made learning more flexible and accessible and has enhanced lifelong learning. The incorporation of technological devices and the Internet into the domain of education has resulted in the popular use of different terms of learning like e-learning, distance learning, blended learning, and online learning. Ningsih and Yusuf (2021) state that these forms of learning are beneficial for learners owing to their flexible nature as they create, reinforce, and afford a considerable educational experience. Through the use of ICT, students can communicate and collaborate with others, and access a variety of resources like educational videos, databases, and online libraries. Not only does using ICT assist students in becoming creative, but it also enables them to develop various skills such as hard skills, soft skills and research skills (Borova et al., 2021). This is supported by the standpoint of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) which believes “education needs to aim to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens.” (OECD, 2018, p. 4, cited in Tiwari, 2021, p. 37). This means that another crucial aspect of extensive use of ICT is not merely to acquire academic skills but rather to gain various skills that are needed to cope with 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. Borova et al. (2021) go on to stress the importance of online learning in motivating learners since the use of ICT positively affects their study abilities, empowers learners to become autonomous, and enhances their self-confidence.

Moroccan universities have recently witnessed a digital transformation encouraged by the digital revolution and the increased implementation of information and technological systems. The period of Covid-19 pandemic is clear evidence of the significance of digitized education in improving the quality of teaching and learning during this crisis, and in overcoming such

unexpected issues. In fact, the crisis has altered teaching practices and accelerated the use of educational technologies to ensure instructional continuity. According to Ferhane and Yassine (2022), using new pedagogical approaches and modernizing the education system is not merely a choice but rather an urgent need to create a modern and internationalized higher education in our country. Thus, the accelerating process of digitization of education at universities is fostered by the growing need to use ICT by the different stakeholders both for administrative and pedagogical purposes. In this regard, Attou (2021) suggests that the shift towards a digital move is an evolution process whereby universities have adopted innovative approaches within a context of societal, economic and technological developments. Indeed, the adoption of these new approaches and integration of ICT in higher education are the outcomes of several reforms undertaken in the last two decades. Reforms such as the Emergency Program (2009), Vision (2015-2030), and Pacte ESRI 2030, have taken academic excellence as a priority by emphasizing the use of digital technology and the acquisition of soft skills (El Ferouali & Ouhadi, 2023). Clearly, the common goal of these reforms is the modernization of higher education institutions through digital transformation and implementation of information technologies to achieve high-quality education within a challenging and competitive world.

### **2.2. Learner Autonomy in Online Education**

The digital transformation discussed above has significantly influenced the pedagogical practices at universities and has resulted in the emergence of new teaching modes like online learning that have various affordances to learner autonomy. This innovative way of learning has not only been regarded as a supplementary medium of the face-to-face method of teaching, but it has also offered learners a major opportunity to manage their learning and develop autonomous abilities. Online learning has been strategically adopted at Moroccan universities to overcome the current challenges such as time management and overcrowding (Bouklah, 2019). It also creates a self-study environment for students where they can gain wide accessibility to resources, scheduling flexibility, and individualized learning pace and style (Serdyukova & Serdyukov, 2013). In other words, online learning enables students to improve their learning autonomy by offering them freedom of choice whereby they self-control their learning experiences, and choose the pace, location, and optimum time to achieve language learning outcomes. Furthermore, as stated by Benson (2011), the linguistic and non-linguistic input offered to learners is among the beneficial outcomes of virtual learning, which allows students to practice and improve their language acquisition. Benson (2011) also believes that during online learning, students have more chances to develop and experience metacognitive strategies through a variety of language practice activities. Additionally, Zhong (2018) notes that online learners can develop critical thinking and collaborative skills as students interact with multiple resources, teachers and peers. Indeed, with recent advances in online tools such as chat and video-conferencing environments, learners have become able to engage in meaningful communication and authentic interactions. In short, online learning assists university students in assuming responsibility for their learning and, thus develops autonomous skills that are fundamental in higher education.

### **2.3. Analysis of Recent Studies**

Analysis of recent studies concerning the role of digital technologies in promoting autonomous and lifelong learning reveals that a variety of issues have been investigated by researchers. On the one hand, some studies suggest that learner involvement in online learning enhances learner autonomy, self-regulated learning behaviours, and success in course completion and that this autonomy is linked to better learning outcomes and efficiency (Brown et al., 2022; Cárcamo & Pérez, 2022). Other scholars have examined how online learning improves collaboration and interaction among learners as collaborative inquiry in an online discussion forum fosters group autonomy by deepening learners' understanding and establishing a community of learning (Zhong, 2021). This view is also supported by Lee (2016) who found out that structured tasks and open-ended tasks, along with teacher scaffolding and personal commitment, foster learner autonomy and social interaction in fully online language learning. Another feature of online

learning gains is that of enhancing learner autonomy by increasing the use of learning strategies, especially in terms of interaction with materials and self-management of learning (Tsai, 2021). The use of web technologies to support self-motivation is also explored. Some research findings indicate that e-learning courses that promote learner autonomy include increasing self-motivation, allowing students to manage their own educational activity, and fostering initiative and persistence (Lazorak et al., 2021). Moreover, promoting learner autonomy in online courses can lead to increased motivation, active involvement, decision-making opportunities, and increased reflection by students (Tomasouw & Marantika, 2020). On the other hand, other research studies reveal that online learning can be challenging and it sometimes hinders the process of learning. Omona (2022), for instance, found out that some students who were engaged in virtual learning reported difficulty in communication, sharing points, and assessment. Other research also indicates that the significant challenges faced by teachers in online learning are the inability to engage learners and poor classroom interaction, while students cite a lack of direct interaction with peers and teachers in addition to connectivity issues (Baburajan et al., 2022).

As far as the higher education context in Morocco is concerned, very few studies have investigated the impact of online learning on learners' autonomy in particular and learning achievements in general, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Zhiri (2019) proposes that Moroccan universities can provide positive learning outcomes by promoting self-regulated learning and enhancing metacognitive skills. This is in line with the results achieved by Ibtissam et al. (2021) who conclude that the use of ICT in a personalized learning environment can have successful learning products by encouraging knowledge self-management and self-construction. This means that learners need to be equipped with the necessary skills to manage their learning instead of being mere receivers of knowledge. This stand is supported by the findings of an experimental study that demonstrates the positive influence of online learning on the development of metacognitive skills (Bouhafa & Hochberg, 2022). The same study also suggests that learners do not expect the instructors' role to be completely replaced by online learning although they value the use of online resources (Bouhafa & Hochberg, 2022). Nevertheless, other studies have revealed that online learning during the lockdown at Moroccan universities has impacted students' achievement and performance in classrooms, showing that the majority of the students find online learning to be quite challenging, which leads them to prefer in-class environments (El Filali, 2022; El Malaki & Kroum, 2022). Other challenges that hinder the use of educational technologies, according to Riyami (2018), include a lack of motivation to use these tools for learners, absence of teacher training on ICT implementation, and limited digital literacy and technical skills. In sum, despite the challenges of online learning, it is advantageous for the promotion of learner autonomy as learners interact in a flexible, personalized and engaging learning environment, where they can exercise the different autonomy aspects.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The study involves a total of 132 BA students studying in the English department at three public universities in Morocco. The sample consists of 80 females (60.6%) and 52 males (39.4%), and their ages range from 18 to 30 years with a majority of participants (78.4%) aged between 18 and 24. The participants have been studying English at the university for a range of 1 to 6 years, with an average of 2 years. As for the interview part, 8 second-year students participated in a semi-structured interview. These students had completed four semesters of English language coursework. Recruitment was conducted through the help of a professor who told students if they were interested in taking part in a research study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time and the confidentiality of their responses. To maintain anonymity, codes from P1 to P8 are assigned to students involved in the interview.

### 3.2. Research Instruments and Procedure

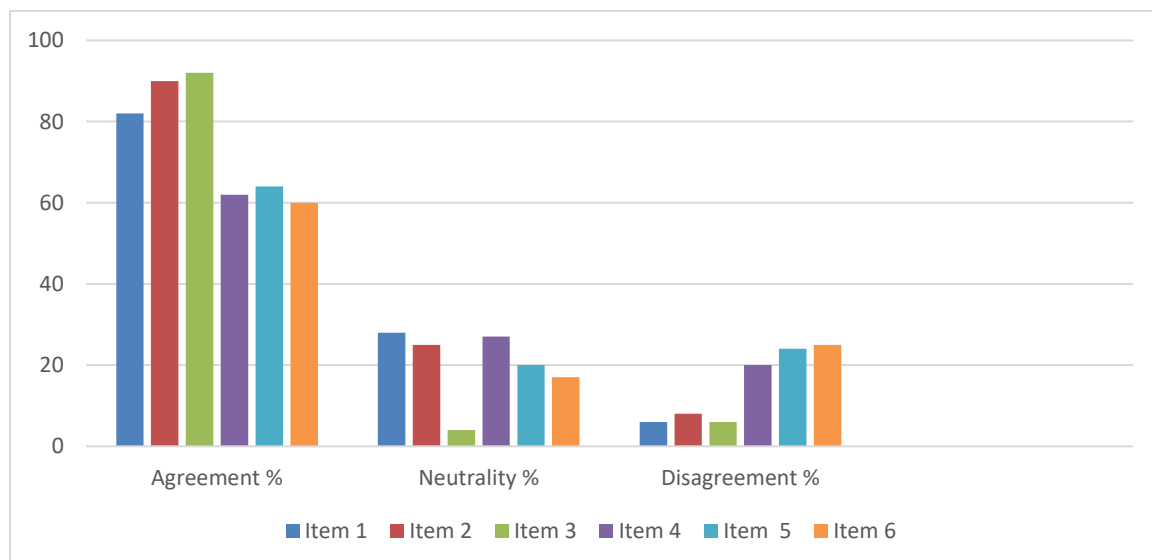
This research is a mixed-method study that aims to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, two research tools are used; a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. A four-section questionnaire was developed by reviewing different literature resources and analyzing some research tools adopted in previous studies. The first section is concerned with demographic data including gender, age, and years of study at university. The second section explores students' perceptions of online learning such as its affordances and challenges by measuring agreement with statements using a 5-point Likert scale. The third section examines students' potential to learn autonomously in online environments. The last section surveys the main online learning activities that the students prefer to engage in to learn English. Using Google Forms, an online survey was created and shared with university students. Data collected from the surveys were entered into SPSS 27 for statistical analysis. Besides, a semi-structured interview was conducted to get insights into students' experiences and perceptions concerning the role of online learning in fostering autonomous abilities and lifelong learning. It mainly focuses on four points; students' overall experience with online learning, ways in which students feel online learning helps them to be more responsible, challenges that the students encounter in online learning environments, and suggestions for improving online learning platforms to better support autonomous learning. According to Peters and Halcomb (2015), semi-structured interviews in qualitative research involve predefined questions or topics and extra surveys as the respondents' replies, offering an understanding of opinions, perceptions, or experiences. As for data analysis, quantitative data is analyzed by means of percentages and frequencies using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data is analyzed using thematic analysis. Indeed, thematic analysis is significant in the interpretation of data generated from interviews as it can be used to develop theories by coding qualitative data, identifying themes, and interpreting the results (Khokhar et al., 2020).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the results of the survey and interview data conducted to address the research questions regarding the perceptions and beliefs of EFL students about the role of web technologies in enhancing their autonomous learning. Besides, the students' experiences with online learning and how it affects their autonomy are investigated. The results of the quantitative part of the study are described and presented statistically using frequencies and percentages.

### 4.1. The Questionnaire

#### 4.1.1. Students' Perceptions of the Role of Online Learning in Fostering Learner Autonomy



**Figure 1. Students' perceptions of the role of online learning in enhancing autonomy**

The survey data shows that the participants generally have positive perceptions of online learning's impact on their autonomy. Figure 1 displays the agreement rates for some significant aspects of autonomy. Item 3 "Online learning helps me search different resources and enrich my learning process" and item 2 "Online learning is effective as it offers flexibility in terms of time management" receive the highest rates of agreement. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the role of online learning in promoting self-directed learning and time management skills (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Zhu, 2021). Item 1 "online learning allows me to be more responsible and autonomous in my learning" is also ranked high as 82% of the students believe that online learning helps them to take more responsibility for their learning process. This result pertains to the first research question about the extent to which EFL university students think web technologies and online learning promote their autonomy. As displayed in the data, most students believe that online learning can fundamentally encourage more autonomous behaviours. This could be due to the reduced immediate supervision and increased responsibility placed on students in online settings (González-González, 2020). The agreement percentage of item 4 "online learning allows me to learn without the teachers' guidance", item 5 "online learning is challenging because of a lack of the necessary digital skills", and item 6 "online learning is difficult because it lacks interaction with peers and teachers" are 62.6%, 64%, and 60.8%, respectively. Concerning item 5, basic digital skills are significant in allowing students to effectively use technological devices for educational purposes. Some studies suggest that lacking these skills negatively impacts online learning by hindering student engagement and overall learning effectiveness (Schulz & Robinson, 2022). As for interaction in online environments, data demonstrates that online learning can be challenging when it lacks face-to-face interaction with teachers and classmates. These findings are supported by data found in a study by Zhang (2023) who concludes that online learning is difficult due to the lack of interaction with peers and teachers, which affects relationship development, motivation, engagement, and real-time assessment.

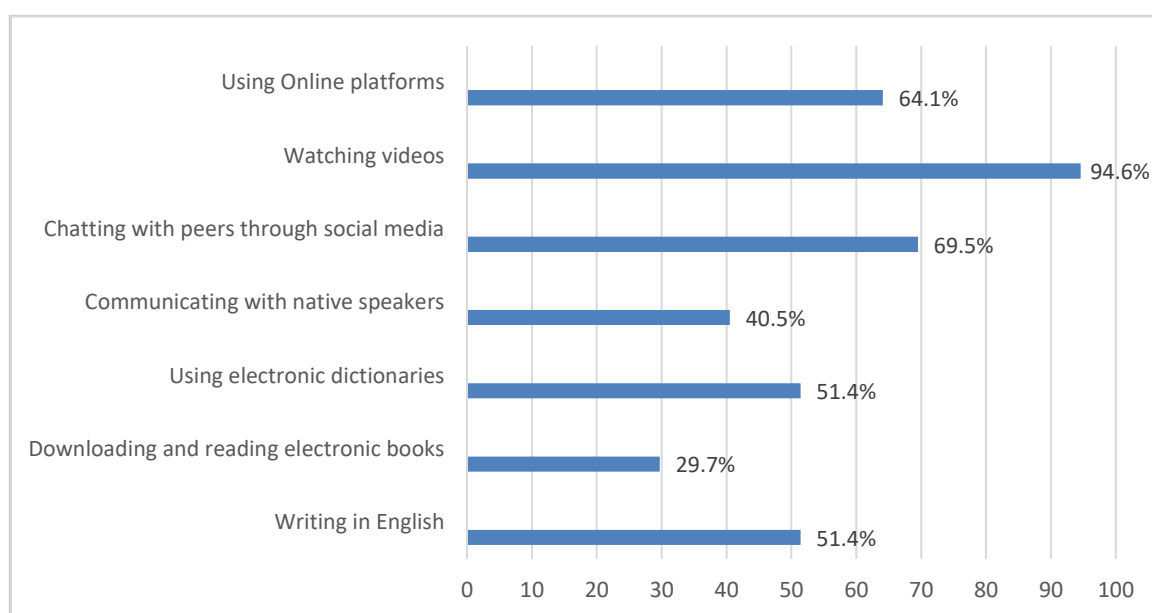
#### **4.1.2. Students' Perceptions of their Potentiality to Learn Autonomously in Online Environments.**

**Table 1. Students' perceptions of their potentiality to learn autonomously in online settings.**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Yes %</b>	<b>No Idea %</b>	<b>No %</b>
1. I can take responsibility for my own online learning.	70.2	13.5	16.2
2. I would like to have a choice of learning options during online learning.	91.8	8.1	0.0
3. I can identify my strengths and weaknesses during online learning.	62.1	24.3	13.5
4. I can set goals for my online learning process.	67.5	21.6	10.8
5. I can evaluate my learning during online learning.	40.5	40.5	18.9
6. I can apply my learning strategies to online learning.	56.7	32.4	10.8
7. I search for additional information to reinforce what I have learned during online learning.	81.0	10.8	8.1
8. I can learn online without much teacher's involvement and guidance.	25.0	21.6	53.3

Survey data reveals that students generally perceive a high potential to learn autonomously in online settings. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for key survey items related to autonomous learning potential. The first item shows that most students feel that they are able to manage their own learning in online environments. This can be interpreted by the fact that most students can easily have flexible access to online learning via their devices and through the availability of an Internet connection. The second item indicates that the majority of the students (91.8%) prefer to have choices and varied activities when learning online. This confirms a conclusion by Castro & Tumibay (2021, p. 1367) stating that “different processes and activities in designing and developing online learning courses can be effective for higher education institutions.” This also can lead students to become more motivated to learn independently. Moreover, data indicates that students display autonomous behaviours by being aware of their strengths and weaknesses concerning language needs, and by being able to set plans to achieve learning objectives (see items 3 and 4). Regarding item 5, students seem to struggle with self-evaluation as they lack the necessary self-assessment skills to assess their learning progress. In this respect, Zhang & Zhang (2022) found that self-evaluation benefits EFL students by improving language performance, enhancing assessment skills, increasing self-efficacy, and promoting self-regulation and metacognitive skills. Data related to item 6 reveals that over half of the participants believe that they can use learning strategies while learning in virtual contexts. These results are consistent with previous research that stresses the role of learning strategies such as collaborating with teachers and peers, employing self-managerial skills, and using the Internet to promote learner autonomy (Khoudri & Zerouh, 2023). The findings also show that effective use of online resources is a key element in students’ perceptions of their potentiality to learn autonomously as 81% of the respondents confirm that they search for information online to enrich their knowledge and skills. The last item 8 displays the inability of 53.3% to learn online without the teacher’s support and guidance. These findings support the results found in item 6 in figure 1 above and they align with previous studies emphasizing the crucial role of teacher support and presence in online learning as teachers’ guidance increases teacher-student relationship satisfaction as well as learners’ motivation (Shannon & Clarke, 2022).

#### 4.1.3. Online Learning Activities



**Figure 2. Activities used by students in online learning**

Figure 2 presents the results of the analyses conducted to find out the types of online learning activities that the participants find most useful. The data reveals a variety of activities used by EFL students to enhance their language skills. From the start, the findings indicate that there is a significant preference for learning through watching videos (94.6%) and relying on interactive multimedia resources to chat with peers (69.5%). This result suggests that the participants find the use of videos and interactive media tools accessible and effective for language learning. These findings support what Yu and Zadorozhnyy (2022) found about the role of multimedia and interactive resources in foreign language learning suggesting that the use of videos and interactive multimedia in language learning positively affects various skills, including digital literacy, collaboration, and students' learning autonomy. Concerning the use of online platforms, 64.1% confirm their use of these tools, which shows that these platforms are effective as they allow students to be actively involved in their learning process. It is noteworthy to mention that Moroccan BA university students are required to register on and use the Rosetta Stone platform which offers a variety of language learning activities and allows learners to receive teachers' feedback and guidance. Additionally, the results show that 'using electronic dictionaries' and 'writing in English' are ranked the same (51.4%), which indicates that they are equally valued by the participants. The identical ranking of the two items can be due to the interrelatedness of the two activities as electronic dictionaries are often used during web-based writing activities, helping students to verify vocabulary, correct mistakes, and enhance their writing quality (Selcuk & Daniela, 2023). As for communication with native speakers of English, 40.5% of the participants confirm their use of this activity. Indeed, online communication is facilitated by social media platforms and applications as concluded in the previous data above. In this vein, some research studies reveal that online communication with native speakers enhances self-directed learning, learner engagement, oral fluency, and personalized as well as collaborative learning experiences (Marull & Kumar, 2020; Masterson, 2020; Hazhar, et al. 2023). The last activity related to downloading and reading electronic books received the lowest rate (29.7%). This result can be attributed to the insufficiency of reading rates among Moroccan students (Ennam, 2023), and to the fact that there is a preference for print over digital resources as print books lead to better comprehension and engagement (Sage et al., 2019).

## **4.2. The Interview**

The purpose of the interview conducted in this study is to explore EFL students' perceptions of how online learning platforms and activities contribute to their ability to learn autonomously. The data of the interviews will offer insights into the strengths and challenges of online learning in fostering independence in language learning. The findings are presented below according to the questions of the interview.

### **4.2.1. Can you describe your overall experience with online learning?**

The main themes that rise in the data concerning students' experiences are flexibility, freedom of choice, and independent learning. Many participants indicated that they appreciated the flexibility of online learning. Participant P3 said: "*Online learning offers us a lot of opportunities to learn at our own pace and on our own schedule. We can access learning at any time using our laptops or mobile phones anywhere... and learning materials are available 24/7, which allows us to study whenever we choose.*" Besides, participant P5 emphasized the importance of online learning compared with in-class learning stating that "*unlike the traditional classroom learning that has limited access to resources outside of class times, online learning offers access to different digital resources, including various activities, videos, e-books, and online libraries.*" As for independent learning, most of the interviewees believe that online learning supports their autonomous abilities. Participant P2, for instance, said: "*Online learning helps us not to rely a lot on teachers and do the learning tasks by ourselves. In addition, online learning gives us the chance to take more responsibility for our learning, and to manage our time freely.*" Clearly, the participants confirm the significance of online learning as most of them find it advantageous for their language proficiency development as well as for autonomy enhancement. This data is consistent with the findings of a study by



Paulsen and McCormick (2020, p. 20) suggesting that “online learning has significant benefits compared to face-to-face learning in terms of perceived academic challenge, learning gains, satisfaction, and better study habits.”

#### 4.2.2. In what ways do you feel online learning helps you to be more autonomous in learning?

The data elicited in this part is pertinent to the second research question of the current study. Three main themes are also generated in the data including developing self-regulated habits, interaction, and motivation. First, some participants talked about the role of online learning in assisting students to develop some autonomous skills and self-directed learning habits. Participant P7, for example, said: *“Online learning has significantly helped me become more autonomous in my language learning. For instance, I can set my own pace with platforms like Rosetta Stone and Coursera. This flexibility allows me to spend extra time on areas where I face difficulties, like grammar, without feeling rushed. I also use online dictionaries and forums such as WordReference to look up words and get explanations, which helps me learn independently. Another thing is that planning study sessions on my calendar app helps me manage my time effectively and I make sure that I follow the plans of my studies.”* Indeed, the quote shows how online learning allows students to plan and set learning objectives as well as develop some study skills that create appropriate conditions for effective autonomous learning. This result is in line with previous research stressing that “participating in an online course increases students’ language learner autonomy by promoting self-regulated learning behaviours” (Cárcamo & Pérez, 2022, p. 449). Second, some interviewees believe that online platforms offer them opportunities to work autonomously through a variety of interactive exercises and quizzes that provide immediate feedback, which helps learners identify their strengths and areas for improvement. The third and final point concerns motivation which plays a significant role in autonomy. In this respect, a response of participant P3 was as follows: *“Setting goals on platforms like Duolingo motivates me to complete daily lessons and check my progress.”* This fact demonstrates how online learning can significantly motivate students to be more engaged in learning activities continuously and, therefore, develop autonomy. This data is also supported by Lazorak et al. (2021, p. 216) concluding that “e-learning courses contribute to increasing learners’ self-motivation, promoting lifelong learning, and enhancing their perception of autonomy.”

#### 4.2.3. What challenges do you encounter in becoming an autonomous learner in an online environment?

The major themes that are found in the data include time management, teachers’ guidance, and the nature of the learning environment. To start with the first theme, unlike what some students mentioned about the positive role of online learning in managing time effectively, other participants believe that it is challenging to make a balance between in-class studies and online learning. In this vein, participant P1 said: *“Online learning can be highly beneficial in opening the door of a broad universe of knowledge, yet can be detrimental in opening a door of procrastination and bad time management.”* Moreover, most students emphasize that the absence of teachers’ guidance in online environments hinders effective learning and, therefore, limits the benefits of this mode of learning in developing autonomous skills. This is shown in Participant P4’s answer: *“Online learning is good and allows us to learn many things, but it cannot replace in-class learning, simply because the guidance of teachers is what makes the process of learning more enjoyable and smooth.”* Similarly, participant P1 said: *“...I also miss feedback and interaction with teachers, which makes it challenging to stay engaged and understand complex topics.”* As far as the online learning environment is concerned, some respondents stated that it is harder to access resources due to some technical issues like unstable Internet connections and the lack of laptops, while others talked about the limited nature of online learning as students cannot solely rely on virtual learning environments. Participant P6, for instance, said: *“Online learning is a good thing, but it can’t be the main source of information and learning in general.”* This means that despite the benefits that online learning can offer, a lack of human engagement and tailored feedback can limit the students’ potential

to learn effectively. Another challenge mentioned by one of the interviewees is related to the difficulty of creating a suitable online learning environment especially at home with distractions from family and other activities, which prevents students from focusing and learning independently. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that students encounter some challenges in online learning including lack of human interaction, social presence, motivation, interactivity, structured content, reliable connections to the Internet, and lack of electronic devices (Alqahtani, 2024; Ferri et al., 2020; Laabidi & Anasse, 2022).

#### **4.2.4. What suggestions do you have for improving online learning platforms to better support autonomous learning?**

Responding to this question, the interviewees suggested three main points; feedback and interaction, motivation and engagement, and technical improvements. As earlier mentioned in the challenges encountered in online learning, most students believe that lack of interaction and support from teachers hinders appropriate learning. Therefore, students during the interview stressed the need for online learning platforms that allow them to get constructive feedback from their teachers. Participant P8 said: *“I think online learning platforms should have more interactive features, like real-time discussion rooms and live quizzes, to keep students engaged... I sometimes need things to be clarified and things become very challenging without interaction with the teachers.”* This first suggestion leads to the second one concerning motivation and engagement. Students highlighted that online learning should offer interesting and engaging activities to motivate learners to use the online platforms regularly for maximum learning benefits. In this respect, an interviewee’s answer was as follows: *“I prefer to use platforms that give students chances to interact with their colleagues and teachers, and also that provide us with interesting activities to help improve our understanding of the courses and motivate us to continue studying.”* This result aligns with the findings of an experimental study by Benhadj (2021) indicating that students who are involved in interactive online learning platforms get motivated and their language proficiency improves compared with the students who receive instruction in traditional learning classrooms. Besides, two interviewees suggested that universities should offer students support and training to better use online platforms to achieve productive outcomes. Participant P5, for example, proposed that *“universities should offer students better technical support and training guides on how to use online platforms to help students manage their learning more effectively.”* Indeed, technical support in online learning platforms is essential for preventing and troubleshooting technology issues, improving the success of various teaching processes, and promoting autonomous learning motivation (Folk et al., 2021)

In summary, the findings reveal that the students involved in the study value web technologies that improve their educational experience, providing flexibility in obtaining information and offering interactive as well as interesting learning possibilities. The participants also value web technologies that promote communication, teamwork, and individualized learning because they allow students to be more responsible and autonomous learners. As for the second research question, the data indicates that online learning fosters learners’ autonomy in various ways. Some significant examples expressed by the participants include the possibility of taking control of their learning process by setting goals, managing time, and studying at their own pace. Online learning also promotes the autonomy of learners by encouraging self-initiative and collaboration through a variety of interactive tools that motivate students to learn continuously and track their progress.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This paper focuses on how web technologies in general and online learning in particular foster the autonomous skills of Moroccan EFL university students. The findings reveal that online learning plays a crucial role in enhancing learner autonomy as most students value its significance in their learning process. The increased responsibility, motivation, flexibility, and access to diverse resources inherent in online learning environments contribute to this enhanced

autonomy. The results also demonstrate that the students involved in the study perceive a high potential for autonomous learning in online contexts stressing their preference for online learning that provides multiple options and different engaging activities. It is worth mentioning that students highly value teachers' guidance in online learning settings since it plays a vital role in enhancing students' online learning experiences. Besides, this study shows that EFL students engage in a variety of online learning activities, with a particular emphasis on interactive and multimedia resources. These activities are perceived as effective in enriching students' learning experiences, improving language skills, and promoting autonomous abilities. The interview data reveals that the students encounter various challenges in the use of online learning such as time management, lack of teachers' guidance, and lack of appropriate online learning environment. To overcome these issues, the participants suggest the necessity for platforms that offer motivating and engaging activities with the presence of teachers' supervision and the institutions' technical support.

These findings have significant implications for designing and implementing online courses for EFL university students. These courses and programs should include various activities that cater to learners' needs and proficiency levels leading to more effective and engaging learning experiences. Universities should also ensure that students can easily access online resources, especially official platforms recommended by the institutions, to support autonomous learning. In this respect, students should be offered training, clear guidelines, and opportunities for self-assessment to reflect on their learning strategies and evaluate their progress. Indeed, teachers' guidance is of paramount importance in online environments as instructors should assist students to clearly understand the structure and objectives of the courses. Therefore, through effective guidance, students have more chances to get constructive feedback which motivates learners and maximizes their autonomous learning potential.

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account. The first limitation is that relying on self-reported data may cause some bias, as the participants might underestimate or overestimate their autonomous abilities. The second limitation concerns specific contextual factors such as the backgrounds of learners which may affect the variables in the study, so the results may not be universally applicable. One final limitation is related to the cross-sectional nature of the study, meaning that it is challenging to explore the impact of online learning on learner autonomy by examining data collected at one point in time. Hence, future research ought to examine the way learners develop autonomy in online settings over a long period. Future research can also rely on experimental or quasi-experimental studies to evaluate the impact of various technology-enhanced tools on autonomy. Clearly, findings of such longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into long-term changes, and, thus, assist instructors in designing appropriate interventions that empower learners to develop and sustain autonomy.

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