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Fostering Autonomous English Learning via Digital Platforms in Higher Education Settings

Mounir Beniche
Mohamed V University, Rabat, Morocco
Email:Mounirbeniche10@gmail.com

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Abstract

Digital platforms have become crucial to modern language learning, offering opportunities for personalization, flexibility, and learner autonomy. This study examines how Moroccan university students use digital platforms to support autonomous English learning. A quantitative descriptive design was used, with data collected from 199 students through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive results indicate that most students study English as part of their academic program (82.4%) and engage moderately with digital learning platforms. Perceptions of platform effectiveness were generally positive, and 83.4% of students considered autonomous English learning important. However, only 26.6% reported receiving systematic guidance from professors on using digital platforms. The findings highlight a gap between students' readiness for autonomous learning and institutional support. Recommendations include integrating digital literacy instruction, training professors in autonomy-enhancing pedagogies, and expanding institutional support for self-directed learning environments.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly reshaped educational practices across the globe. In the field of language learning, various digital tools such as mobile applications, learning management systems, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and online practice platforms have changed the way learners access information and regulate their learning processes. These technologies encourage greater flexibility, individualized learning paths, and opportunities for independent engagement (Reinders & White, 2016). As a result, digital environments are increasingly recognized as effective means for developing learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy, generally understood as the capacity and willingness to take charge of one's own learning (Little, 1991), goes beyond simply learning independently. It encompasses higher-order skills such as metacognitive awareness, strategic learning, goal formulation, and reflective practice (Benson, 2013). In 21st-century education, the student occupies a central role in the learning process and is expected to develop critical thinking, problem-solving abilities in real-life contexts, communication and collaboration skills, as well as creativity. To present more persuasive arguments in debates, students need to move beyond emotional reasoning and support their viewpoints with logical and rational evidence (Beniche, 2025).

Digital technologies can facilitate these processes by allowing learners to manage the pace, content, and mode of their learning, while also providing instant feedback and access to a wide range of resources. In the Moroccan context, English is progressively viewed as an essential skill for academic advancement and professional development. Accordingly, the use

of digital learning platforms in higher education has expanded in recent years. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of empirical research focusing on how Moroccan university students engage with these tools to support autonomous English learning. In addition, the extent of institutional and pedagogical support provided by universities and professors for fostering learner autonomy remains insufficiently explored.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining quantitative data collected from 199 students at Mohamed V University. It investigates students' frequency of digital platform use, their perceptions of its effectiveness, their attitudes toward learner autonomy, and the degree of instructional support they receive in their learning process.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Learner Autonomy in Language Education

Autonomous learning is regarded not only as a teaching approach but also as a theoretical lens for interpreting how learning occurs. It encompasses multiple elements, such as content delivery, the choice of learning activities, engagement in online learning environments, and the efficient use of ICT tools (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023).

For Holec (1981), autonomy refers to a learner's capacity to take responsibility for their own learning. This means that learners actively engage in every stage of the learning process, including setting objectives, managing their learning, and assessing their progress and outcomes. Autonomy highlights the learner's ability to assume responsibility for their own learning, involving reflective thinking, making informed choices about goals and strategies, and independently managing and guiding their learning process (Little, 1991). In the same vein, Benson (2007) suggests that the ability to manage one's own learning is grounded in key psychological capacities, such as setting goals, assessing results, and engaging in critical reflection. In language education, learner autonomy is widely regarded as a key principle influencing both teaching theories and classroom practices, as it enhances learners' responsibility for directing and managing their own learning processes.

Extending this view, learner autonomy was later redefined as a multidimensional concept that includes both psychological and contextual aspects, emphasizing that it can be developed through effective teaching practices and supportive learning environments (Benson, 2013). Higher education in the 21st century seeks to establish optimal learning environments where students are encouraged to question, interact, and engage in debates in order to strengthen their thinking abilities. Advances in modern technology have greatly expanded access to knowledge across various disciplines, making information readily available to learners (Beniche, 2023a).

Empirical research has shown that learners who are autonomous typically exhibit greater motivation, employ learning strategies more effectively, and achieve more sustained long-term outcomes (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Nevertheless, learner autonomy does not emerge naturally; instead, it needs to be deliberately fostered through well-structured pedagogical guidance and explicit training in self-regulation and metacognitive skills.

2.2 Digital Platforms and Language Learning

Digital technologies have profoundly reshaped language education by establishing flexible and dynamic learning environments that promote learner autonomy. They enable access to a wide range of authentic materials, support individualized learning trajectories, and create interactive experiences that go beyond the limits of traditional classrooms. According to Reinders and White (2016), technology-mediated contexts naturally encourage autonomy by allowing learners to decide the time, place, and manner of their learning, thereby transferring control from professor-led instruction to learner-directed engagement.

A key advantage of digital platforms lies in their ability to facilitate self-regulated learning. By incorporating tools such as progress monitoring, goal-setting mechanisms, and adaptive feedback, these platforms encourage learners to assess and manage their own

performance. Recent systematic reviews indicate that AI-powered systems can modify content difficulty and learning pace in response to individual progress, helping to sustain appropriate levels of challenge and engagement (El-Sabagh, 2021). Such personalization enhances learners' sense of responsibility and supports informed decision-making, both of which are fundamental to the development of learner autonomy.

Furthermore, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications such as Duolingo, Memrise, Babbel, and Rosetta Stone illustrate how digital platforms translate autonomy into practice through micro-learning, gamified features, and adaptive learning technologies. These applications usually provide brief, structured learning segments paired with interactive tasks and instant feedback, which support both engagement and knowledge retention. In addition, gamification components that include points, badges, and leaderboards enhance motivation by drawing on mechanisms such as habit formation and reward-based reinforcement, thereby promoting regular and sustained learning practice.

Importantly, empirical research indicates that such platforms not only enhance learner motivation but also lead to measurable learning outcomes. Studies comparing app-based learning with traditional instruction have reported improvements in vocabulary acquisition, grammatical competence, and receptive skills, particularly when learners engage consistently with these tools (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). However, scholars caution that the effectiveness of these technologies relies heavily on sustained engagement and thoughtful pedagogical integration, as an overemphasis on gamification may divert attention from deeper cognitive processing (Hanus & Fox, 2015).

2.3 Digital Learning in Moroccan Higher Education

Recent studies point to an increasing incorporation of digital technologies in Moroccan higher education, a trend that has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and national digitalization initiatives. Universities in Morocco have progressively adopted e-learning platforms, artificial intelligence tools, and blended learning models to improve teaching and learning processes (Benali et al., 2021). This shift reflects a broader institutional effort to modernize higher education and align it with global technological developments.

In addition, research suggests that digital tools such as adaptive learning systems and AI-driven applications are being utilized to tailor learning experiences, enhance language acquisition, and boost student engagement (Bennani & Oubahssi, 2022). These technologies are particularly valuable in multilingual contexts like Morocco, where students frequently navigate between Arabic, French, and English in academic environments.

Despite these positive developments, a number of structural and pedagogical constraints continue to hinder the effective implementation of digital learning. A major challenge is the insufficient training provided to both instructors and students, as many educators lack the necessary skills to integrate digital tools effectively into their teaching practices, thereby affecting the quality of technology-enhanced instruction (El Idrissi Bouzidi & Kabaili, 2026).

Another ongoing issue is the inadequate integration of digital literacy within university curricula. Although students frequently use digital technologies, many lack the critical and academic skills required to use them effectively. This shortcoming points to a lack of structured curricular focus on digital competencies and underscores the need for comprehensive training initiatives that address both technical and pedagogical dimensions (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Moreover, the rapid shift to online and distance learning during the pandemic exposed underlying weaknesses in digital preparedness. While institutions implemented emergency remote teaching solutions, challenges related to learner motivation, inconsistent platform usage, and limited prior experience with online education became evident (Boudlal & Erguig, 2024).

These limitations have direct implications for autonomous English language learning. Although digital platforms provide opportunities for self-directed learning, their effectiveness largely depends on learners' digital skills, access to resources, and the availability of

supportive institutional environments. In the absence of adequate infrastructure, training, and curricular integration, the role of digital technologies in promoting learner autonomy remains constrained.

Overall, while Moroccan higher education is making steady progress in adopting digital learning, the literature emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms, particularly in infrastructure development, teacher training, and digital literacy, to fully realize the potential of these technologies in supporting autonomous language learning.

2.4 Professor Support and Autonomy

Professor guidance is fundamental to the development of learner autonomy, especially in technology-enhanced learning environments. Although digital tools open up possibilities for independent learning, students often need structured support to use these tools effectively. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) argue that autonomy does not arise naturally; rather, it must be fostered through pedagogical practices that help learners acquire the skills to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. In digital contexts, this involves guiding students in the effective use of online resources, as well as in setting goals and engaging in self-assessment.

Likewise, Benson (2013) emphasizes that professors continue to play a central role in promoting autonomy not as transmitters of knowledge, but as facilitators who create conditions that encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning. This role includes designing meaningful learning activities, offering clear guidance on how to use digital tools, and encouraging reflective practices. Reinders (2010) further points out that learners require explicit instruction in self-directed learning strategies, particularly in digital environments where unfamiliarity can hinder independent learning. Creating environments that encourage learners to develop their hidden abilities is essential in modern educational approaches, as it opens new opportunities for both learning and practice. This reflects the principle of service-learning, where students acquire knowledge through action and reflection while assuming responsibility for expressing and sharing their ideas and experiences (Beniche, 2023b).

In addition, research on self-regulated learning highlights the importance of professor support in developing learners' metacognitive skills. Zimmerman (2002) explains that effective self-regulation involves setting objectives, applying suitable strategies, and reflecting on outcomes—processes that are often supported by professors. In technology-mediated settings, such guidance becomes even more essential, as learners must navigate large amounts of information and make informed decisions about their learning paths (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012).

Without sufficient professor support, digital learning can become disorganized and superficial. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) warn that learners may struggle to evaluate the credibility of resources, sustain motivation, or engage in deep learning when left entirely on their own. Similarly, Selwyn (2016) argues that access to technology alone does not ensure meaningful learning outcomes; instead, effective pedagogical integration is necessary to promote critical thinking and long-term engagement.

Moreover, recent research underscores the significance of professors' digital competence in fostering learner autonomy. Educators who possess strong digital pedagogical skills are better positioned to guide students in using technology effectively, incorporate digital literacy into their teaching, and encourage autonomous learning behaviors (Redecker, 2017). This perspective aligns with the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators, which highlights the role of professors in enabling learners to become independent and responsible users of technology.

Overall, while digital technologies offer substantial opportunities to enhance learner autonomy, professor guidance remains a key mediating factor. Providing support in strategy use, goal-setting, and self-evaluation allows learners to engage with digital tools in meaningful and productive ways. In the absence of such guidance, the potential benefits of digital learning may not be fully realized, reaffirming the enduring importance of the professor's role in technology-supported education.

3. Research Questions

1- To what extent do Moroccan university students use digital platforms to support autonomous English learning?
2- What is the level of learner autonomy among Moroccan university students who use digital platforms?
3- How do students perceive the effectiveness of digital platforms in improving their English learning?
4- To what extent do professors provide guidance on using digital platforms for autonomous learning?

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative descriptive design was adopted to examine patterns of digital tool use and perceptions of autonomous English learning among university students.

4.2 Participants

Participants were 199 Moroccan university students from Mohamed V University. A convenience sampling technique was used due to availability and accessibility.

4.3 Instrument

The structured questionnaire included sections on the following:

1- Demographic information
2- Use of digital platforms
3- Perceived effectiveness
4- Attitudes toward autonomy
5- Professor guidance

Items were measured using multiple-choice and Likert-scale formats.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was validated through expert review and piloted with 20 students. Cronbach's alpha = 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

4.5 Data Collection Procedure

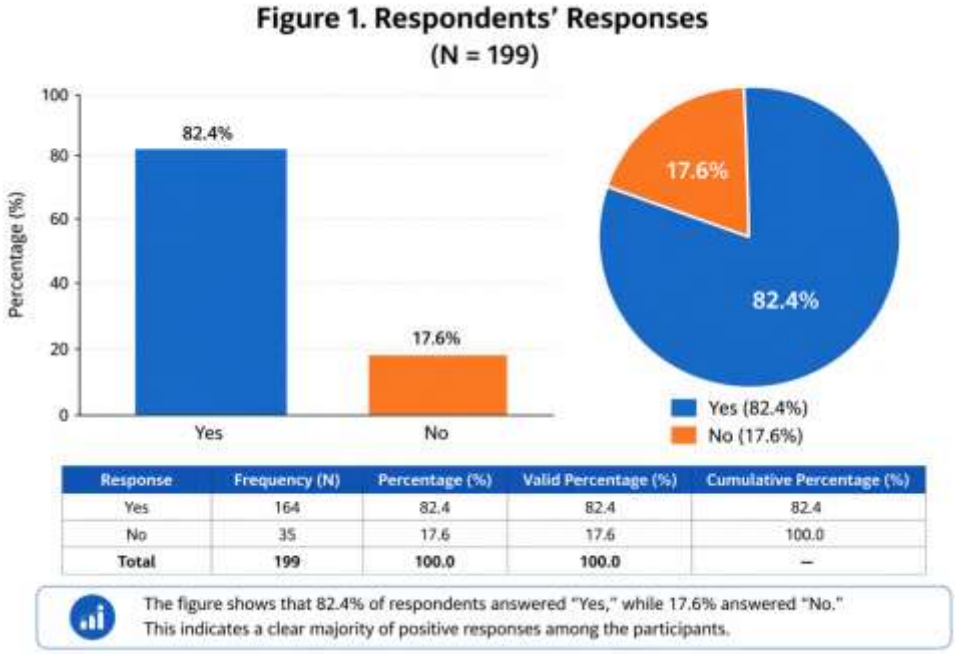
Data were collected in Spring 2025 using a Google Forms survey distributed via institutional email and classroom platforms.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to summarize students' responses across all questionnaire items.

5. Results

5.1 English as Part of Academic Program



Response	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Yes	164	82.4	82.4	82.4
No	35	17.6	17.6	100.0
Total	**199**	**100.0**	**100.0**	–

Figure 1. Do You Study English as Part of Your Academic Program?

The descriptive statistics in Figure 1 indicate that most respondents (n = 164, 82.4%) study English as part of their academic program, while a smaller proportion (n = 35, 17.6%) do not. The absence of missing data enhances the reliability of these findings.

The results highlight the growing role of English in Moroccan higher education, where it is increasingly integrated into university curricula. This trend reflects its importance for accessing academic resources, participating in international research networks, and improving employability in a globalized job market. The expansion of digital learning environments, which largely operate in English, further reinforces its significance.

However, the 17.6% of students who do not study English may reflect differences across academic disciplines, institutional policies, or access to language-learning opportunities, raising questions about educational equity and inclusion.

5.2 Frequency of Using Digital Platforms

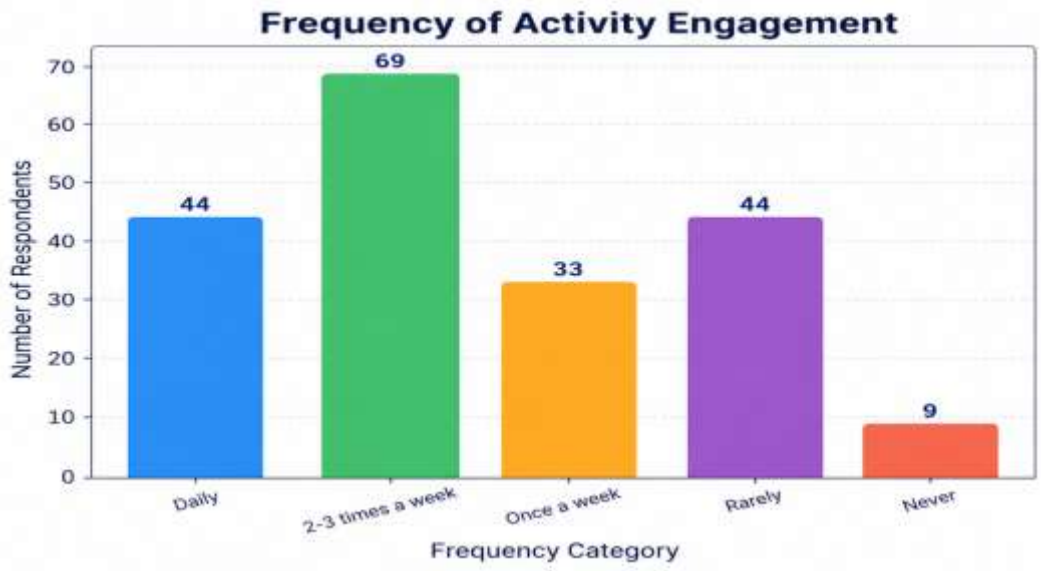


Figure 2. Frequency of Using Digital Platforms for English Learning

The results indicate a moderate level of digital platform use for English learning. The largest group of students (34.7%) reported using digital platforms 2–3 times per week, while

22.1% used them daily and an equal proportion used them rarely. Smaller percentages reported using them once a week (16.6%) or never (4.5%).

Combining daily users and those who use digital platforms 2–3 times weekly shows that 56.8% of participants are regular users. This pattern is supported by the mean score (M = 2.52), which suggests fairly regular but not intensive use.

Overall, the findings show that digital platforms are widely used, although they have not become a daily learning habit for all students. Occasional use by a considerable proportion of participants may be linked to limited digital skills, inadequate access to technology, low motivation for self-directed learning, or the insufficient integration of digital tools into course requirements.

These results suggest that access to digital tools alone does not guarantee regular use. Effective guidance and support from professors remain important for encouraging sustained engagement and fostering autonomous learning.

5.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Digital Platforms

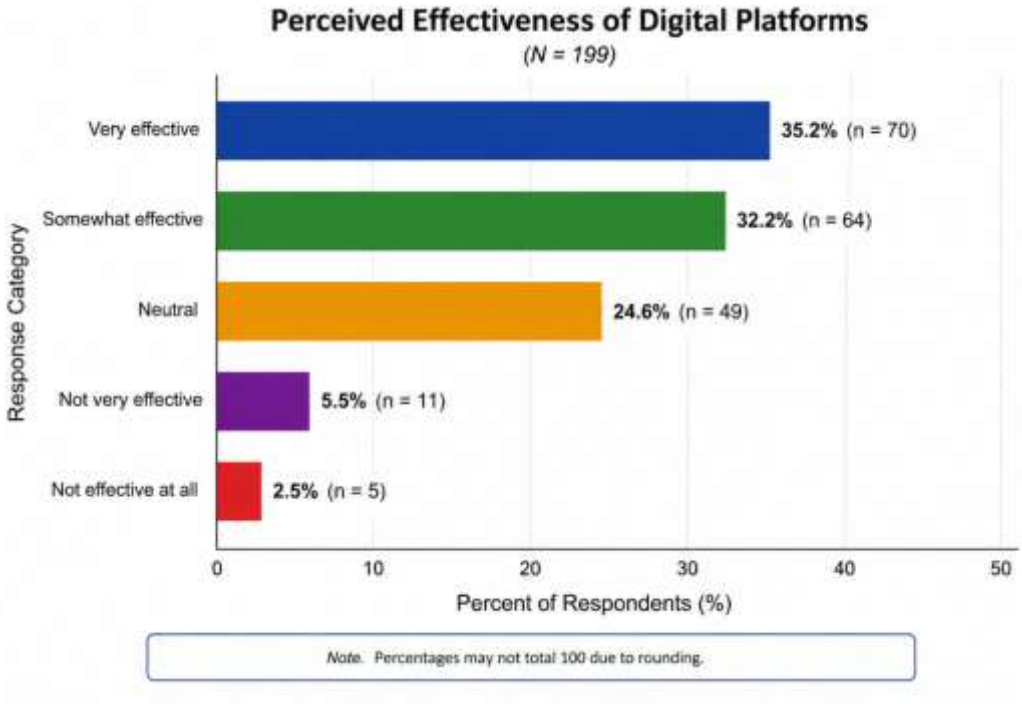


Figure 3. Perceived Effectiveness of Digital Platforms

The results indicate that most students have a positive view of digital platforms for learning English. In total, 67.4% of respondents rated these platforms as effective, with 35.2% describing them as very effective and 32.2% as somewhat effective. This indicates strong support for their usefulness in language learning.

At the same time, 24.6% of students chose a neutral response, suggesting mixed or uncertain experiences. Only a small number expressed negative opinions, with 5.5% rating them as not very effective and 2.5% as not effective at all. Altogether, negative responses make up just 8%, showing that dissatisfaction is relatively low.

Using a Likert scale (1 = Very effective to 5 = Not effective at all), the average score is estimated at around M ≈ 2.08. This reflects an overall positive perception, leaning closer to "somewhat effective" than to a neutral position.

These findings suggest that students not only use digital platforms but also see them as helpful tools for learning English. This connection between use and positive perception supports the idea that digital platforms play an important role in language learning.

Several explanations can be considered. First, digital platforms offer interactive, flexible, and learner-centered experiences, which increases their educational value. Second, they

support learner autonomy by allowing students to control their pace, choose content, and practice independently. Third, they provide easy access to a wide range of resources such as videos, quizzes, and discussion forums, which can improve understanding and engagement.

However, the relatively high number of neutral responses (24.6%) is important. These students may use digital platforms irregularly, face technical or usability issues, or may not clearly see improvements in their English skills. They may also lack guidance on how to use these tools effectively.

The small percentage of negative responses (8%) shows that while some students are dissatisfied, this is not a widespread issue. It is more likely related to individual differences such as digital skills, motivation, or personal learning preferences.

5.4 Attitudes Toward Autonomous Learning

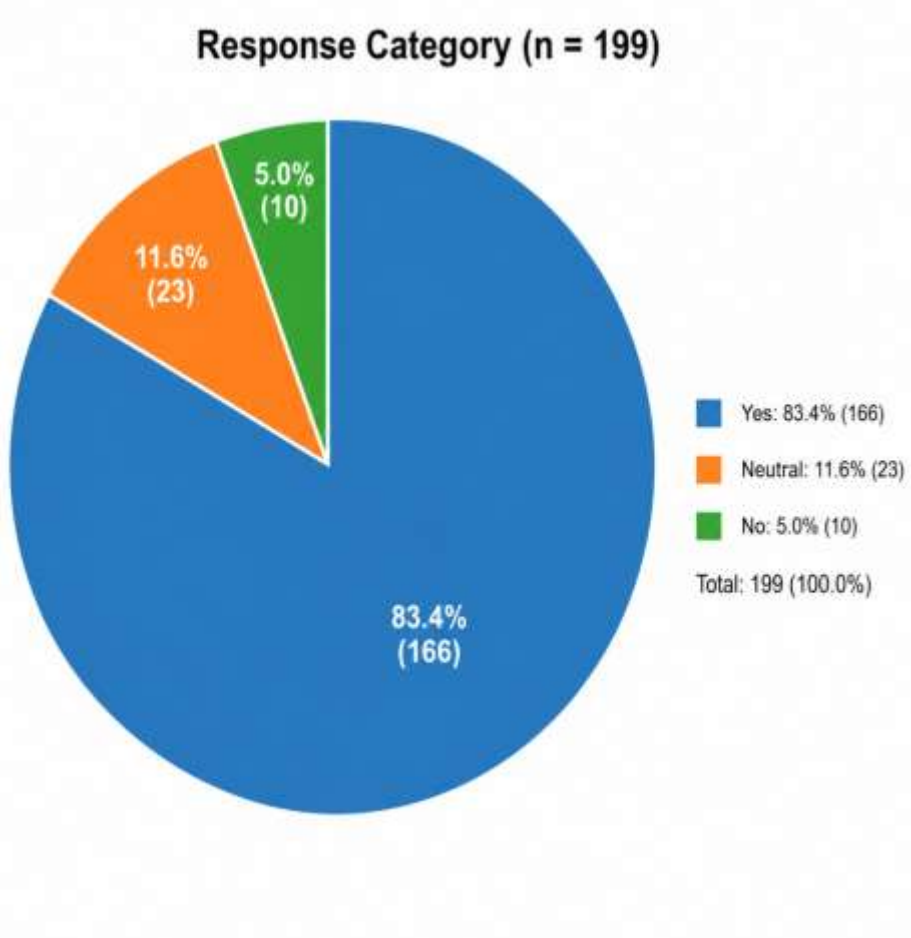


Figure 4. Importance of Autonomous English Learning

The results reveal a strong agreement among students about the importance of autonomous English learning. A large majority (n = 166, 83.4%) said it is important, while only a small group (n = 10, 5.0%) disagreed. Another 11.6% gave neutral responses.

Overall, the responses are clearly positive. Using a simple scale (1 = Yes, 2 = Neutral, 3 = No), the average score is about M ≈ 1.22. This indicates a very strong belief in the value of learner autonomy.

These findings suggest that students are highly aware of and supportive of learning independently. Most students not only understand the idea of autonomy but also see it as important for their academic success and English development.

This result becomes even more meaningful when compared with earlier findings. In Figure 2, students showed moderate use of digital platforms. In Figure 3, they had generally positive opinions about their effectiveness. In Figure 4, they strongly supported autonomous

learning. Together, this shows an important point: students believe in autonomous learning, even if they do not always practice it fully.

Several reasons may explain this strong support. First, modern education often promotes learner autonomy, which shapes students' views. Second, students are used to digital environments, where independent learning is necessary. Third, they understand that independence and lifelong learning are important for future careers.

However, the 11.6% of neutral responses is still important. These students may not fully understand what autonomous learning means, may feel unsure about learning on their own, or may prefer more structured, professor-led methods.

The small percentage of negative responses (5.0%) shows that opposition to autonomy is low, but still present. This may be due to differences in learning styles or previous educational experiences.

5.5 Professor Guidance

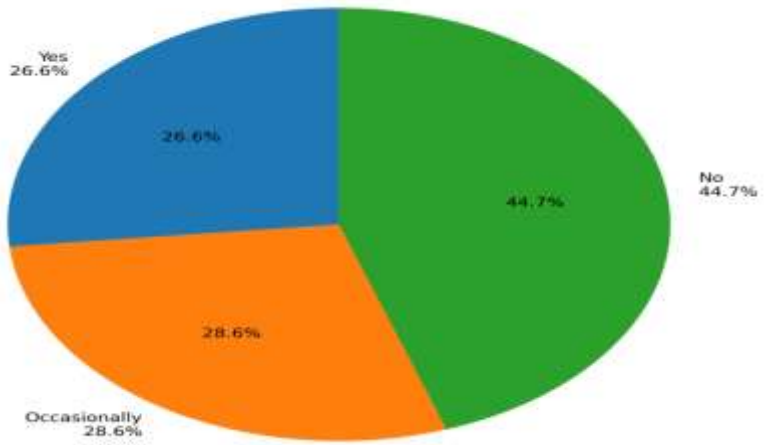


Figure 5. Guidance from Professors

The results indicate that students receive limited guidance from their professors on how to use digital platforms for learning. The largest group (44.7%) reported that they receive no guidance at all. Another 28.6% said they receive help only occasionally, while just 26.6% stated that they consistently receive guidance.

If we combine those who receive regular and occasional support, 55.2% of students get at least some form of help. However, this support is not consistent, and fewer than one-third of students receive regular guidance.

Using a simple scale (1 = Yes, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = No), the average score is about $M \approx 2.18$. This indicates a low to moderate level of guidance, closer to “occasional” support than consistent instruction.

These findings highlight an important gap between what students need and what they receive from their professors. Earlier results showed that students moderately use digital platforms, see them as effective, and strongly believe in autonomous learning. However, this figure shows that teaching support does not fully match these positive attitudes.

This gap is important because, although autonomy is encouraged, a lack of guidance can create several problems. Students may use digital platforms in a limited or ineffective way, struggle to choose suitable learning resources, fail to develop effective learning strategies, and achieve weaker long-term results.

The relatively high percentage of “occasional” responses (28.6%) also suggests that guidance is irregular. It may depend on individual professors rather than being part of a clear and consistent institutional approach.

6. Discussion

The findings highlight that Moroccan university students are generally motivated to use digital tools and engage in autonomous English learning. A large majority of students (82.4%) study English as part of their academic programs, which emphasizes the growing importance of English in Moroccan higher education and in the job market. This reflects a broader shift toward internationalization, where English is increasingly seen as essential for academic success and career opportunities.

The use of digital platforms is moderate but still meaningful. More than half of the students use these tools regularly, showing that digital learning is becoming part of their study habits. This trend is consistent with global research, such as Reinders and White (2016), who confirm the growing role of online and mobile technologies in supporting flexible and self-directed language learning. In addition, most students (67.4%) believe that digital platforms are effective, which supports the work of Benson (2013), who argues that digital tools can improve access to learning materials, increase engagement, and allow learners to personalize their learning experience.

Students also showed a very strong belief in the importance of learner autonomy (83.4%). This aligns with the perspective of Little (1991), who suggests that autonomy becomes effective when learners understand its value and take responsibility for their own learning. In this study, students appear ready and willing to adopt more independent learning approaches.

However, the most critical issue revealed by the findings is the low level of professor guidance. Only 26.6% of students reported receiving regular support from their professors on how to use digital tools for learning. This confirms earlier research by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), which shows that although professors often support the idea of learner autonomy, they may not have enough training or practical strategies to implement it effectively in the classroom.

These findings suggest that motivation and positive attitudes alone are not enough. For autonomous learning to be truly effective, students need structured support and clear guidance from their professors. This highlights the need for institutional changes, particularly in the form of professor training programs that focus on integrating digital tools and promoting guided autonomy. By providing professors with the needed equipment and strategies, universities can better support students in transforming their motivation into effective and sustained learning practices.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how digital platforms support autonomous English learning among Moroccan university students. The results show that there is clear progress, but this transformation is still not fully complete.

On the positive side, Moroccan students appear ready for both digital and autonomous learning. English is widely included in academic programs, and students generally have positive attitudes toward digital tools and independent learning. They also believe that digital platforms are effective, which suggests that the basic conditions for autonomous learning are already in place.

However, this readiness does not always lead to consistent or well-organized learning practices. The moderate use of digital platforms shows that student engagement remains inconsistent. In addition, the low level of guidance from professors points to an important weakness in the learning system. This creates a key issue: students are expected to learn independently, but they are not given enough support to do so effectively.

This gap has important consequences. Without proper guidance, students may use digital tools in a random or superficial way. As a result, they may not fully develop their language

skills or their ability to manage their own learning. This shows that autonomy should not mean learning alone without support, but rather learning with guidance and structure from professors.

From an institutional point of view, these findings suggest the need for change in teaching practices. Universities should not only provide access to digital tools but also integrate them more effectively into teaching. This means including digital platforms in course design, linking them to learning objectives, and using them in assessment. At the same time, professors need ongoing training to help them support students and guide them in using digital tools effectively.

To summarize, this study shows that positive attitudes toward autonomous learning are not enough on their own. For autonomous learning to succeed, there must be a balance between what students believe, what they actually do, and the support they receive from institutions. If one of these elements is missing, as seen with limited professor guidance, the overall learning process becomes less effective.

8. Limitations

Although this study offers useful insights, several limitations should be considered. First, the data are based on students' self-reports, which may be influenced by personal perceptions or bias. This means that responses might not fully reflect actual learning behaviors. Second, the study uses a purely quantitative design, which limits a deeper understanding of students' experiences, challenges, and strategies when using digital platforms. As a result, important details about how autonomy is practiced in real learning contexts may not be fully captured.

To address these limitations, future research should consider using mixed-methods approaches. For example, combining surveys with interviews could provide a more comprehensive picture of how students engage with digital tools and how autonomous learning develops in practice.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed to improve digital and autonomous English learning:

1- Digital literacy should be integrated into English-language curricula to help students develop the skills needed to use online tools effectively.
2- Professors should receive training on how to support learner autonomy through digital pedagogy, including how to guide students in using platforms in a structured way.
3- Universities should provide stronger institutional support, such as digital learning centers or workshops, to assist students in their learning.
4- Students should be encouraged to use digital platforms more strategically, for example by setting learning goals, monitoring their progress, and selecting appropriate resources.

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Author's Bio

Dr. Mounir Beniche is a university professor at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. He is also a freelance translator and a public speaking coach. He has participated in many national and international conferences on education and current challenges, cooperative learning and teaching, soft skills, and civic education. His research interests include applied linguistics, language proficiency,English for specific purposes, soft skills, and discourse analysis.