Learner Autonomy during COVID-19: The Case of Moroccan EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is one of the predictors of academic performance. Many researchers have argued that moving from secondary to higher school is a big transition. Shifting the focus from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness, learners in higher school display less reliance on their teachers to carry on their learning. Throughout this process, learners develop their autonomy and boost their independence. However, numerous studies revealed that most students are unaware of this shift. The purpose of this paper is to assess the autonomy of Moroccan EFL undergraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Equally, this study aims at developing awareness of some strategies and techniques students use to increase their autonomy and self-independence. To achieve this purpose, the study employed a quantitative approach. A Likert scale-based questionnaire was administered to 100 (55 males and 45 females) EFL Moroccan undergraduate students. The research data was generated and analyzed using SPSS. Statistical analysis revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic (69%) of EFL students were not aware of their role as independent and autonomous learners. Likewise, only (30%) of them were involved in syllabus design. Nevertheless (49%) of EFL students revealed their readiness to be part of decision-making concerning the teaching-learning process. The study results suggest that the use of the internet, self-managerial skills, peer and teacher collaboration are among the effective strategies students employ to increase their autonomy and self-independence alike.

Keywords: Covid-19, learner autonomy, learner-centeredness, teacher centeredness

1. Introduction

Although learner-centered teaching has been recommended in recent years, teacher-centered teaching styles are nevertheless predominant in actual teaching-learning practices (Babayeva & Istamova, 2023). However, in a teacher-centered instruction model, the teacher is the main authority figure, and students are expected to passively receive knowledge from their teachers (Skrefsrud, 2022; El Hammoumi et al., 2021). In contrast, in a student-centered learning context, students are active and engaged in the learning process, and the teacher's role primarily involves facilitating and guiding students to achieve their goals (Subedi & Shrestha, 2020).

Moroccan students at the secondary level are exposed to the teacher-centered instruction model due to a variety of factors, including teachers' perceptions of teaching and contextual constraints, as well as students' perceptions of learning (Ghaicha & Mezouari, 2018; El Hammoumi et al., 2021). Upon completing their Bachelor's degree, Moroccan students face an existential dilemma as they prepare to transition from a familiar secondary school environment to a new and challenging higher education setting. This conundrum is not unique to Morocco; rather, students around the world may struggle with this transition.

The realization that the teacher's role in education has evolved from spoon-feeding and hand-holding to facilitating knowledge construction by learners (Holec, 1981) can be challenging for some pupils. College teachers are expected to fulfill specific responsibilities, such as acting as facilitators and guides so as to meet students' fundamental psychological needs for independence (Julian, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Gocić & Jankovic, 2022). However, some students seem to lack awareness of this reality. In Morocco, undergraduate students in the Department of English are expected to be aware of their roles, as awareness is key to the willingness to take responsibility (Hawkins, 2018; Ozer & Yukselir, 2023), become self-directed (Britland, 2019), and take ownership of their academic work (Tseng et al., 2020). As adult learners, they should no longer rely on their teachers and instead assume more responsibility for their learning. They are trusted to take the initiative, engage in learning, and become critical and creative members of their communities (Lee et al., 2023). However, in reality, most undergraduates seem naive about this issue.

With the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in Morocco, the situation has become far worse. The global outbreak of Covid-19 has caused a significant impact on the educational system worldwide, leading educators and learners to shift towards an online mode of teaching and learning unexpectedly (Li & Yu, 2022). However, the vast majority of students have struggled to adapt to the new changes and have been unaware of their autonomy. In other words, the shift from one level to another (from secondary education to higher education) and from traditional face-to-face to a new mode of learning (online or e-learning) has challenged their roles and is perceived as a reality they are unwilling to accept. Therefore, students were required to find a way to train themselves to be autonomous at this level (as BA students). Otherwise, they won't find the will to manage their future affairs. As a result of this crisis, there was unequal access to education, with some students receiving support and learning to be self-sufficient, while others are left behind. To address this issue, the Moroccan Ministry of Education has implemented a new learning approach, namely e-learning or online learning, in all educational institutions. Under this approach, students are instructed to learn from home, and exams have been postponed. However, students have encountered challenges with online learning. It's worth noting that the impact of this unprecedented situation on students varies from person to person.

Research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light several issues in online learning. Virtual communication has been found to be less effective than face-to-face communication, resulting in difficulties in teacher-student interactions (Baber, 2020). Students have also been observed to lack self-confidence (Le & Nguyen, 2022), while some teachers and students lack the necessary skills to use technology effectively (Azhiimah et al., 2021). Additionally, some students are unable to take learning initiatives (ibid), and some teachers and students are unfamiliar with online learning (Bahasoan

et al., 2020). Furthermore, the unclear nature of instructions provided by teachers when assigning tasks (Ramanta, & Widayanti, 2020) and students' inability to monitor, organize, and take control of online learning at home have been noted (Utami & Cahyono, 2020).

Although recent studies (Bachiri & Sahli, 2020; El Hammoumi, 2021; Benlaghrissi, 2023) have examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Morocco, there has been a lacuna in research on the autonomy of Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners during the transition from secondary school to college amidst the pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the level of autonomy demonstrated by Moroccan undergraduate students studying EFL during the pandemic. By exploring the learning strategies and techniques that students employ to enhance their autonomy and self-regulation, this study can provide valuable insights to both current and future undergraduate students, enabling them to become more self-directed and autonomous learners. To achieve this purpose, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent Moroccan undergraduate students, from the Department of English, at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdulah University, Dher El Mahraz Faculty is considered aware of their autonomy, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- To what extent Moroccan undergraduate students, from the Department of English, at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdulah University, Dher El Mahraz Faculty was ready to take responsibility and control their learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic?
- How to best raise students' awareness and promote learner autonomy among Moroccan undergraduate students, from the Department of English, at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdulah University, Dher El Mahraz Faculty?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy in language learning lacks consensus, despite it being frequently assumed to be well-understood (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Fukuda (2018) and Huei-Ju (2018) argue that learners' metacognitive knowledge is crucial to achieving genuine autonomy, which involves setting goals, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on the learning process. Autonomous learners should be self-directed and take responsibility for their own learning, organizing and regulating their plans independently. While the mode of teaching need not necessarily shift from teacher-centered to student-centered, learner autonomy hinges on students' acceptance of responsibility (Goćić & Jankovic, 2022).

Several prominent scholars have identified key principles of learner autonomy, including awareness, ability, willingness, readiness, responsibility, control, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-directed learning, lifelong learning, learner beliefs, decision-making, active learning, dependence, and independence (Tran & Vuong, 2023; Curry et al., 2017; Razali et al., 2018; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Benson & Voller, 2014; Nguyen, 2014; Irgatoğlu et al., 2023; Hsu, 2015; Sinclair, 2009; Tran et al., 2020; Giveh, 2018; Barkel, 2018; Bai & Guo, 2018; Jacobs & Shan, 2016; Cakici, 2017). These principles reflect the importance of learners' active participation, engagement, and investment in their own learning, as well as their ability to make informed decisions, take ownership of their learning, and adapt to different learning situations. Ultimately, achieving learner autonomy requires learners to be aware of their learning and assume responsibility for it, while also being supported and guided by teachers and other resources.

Compared to traditional teaching methods that prioritize the one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers to students, the constructivist theory highlights the significance of learners' prior knowledge and experiences in shaping their learning and understanding (Feltes & Oliveira, 2019; Wang & Zhang, 2022). According to constructivism, which is rooted in Piaget's cognitive developmental theories and Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning, knowledge is actively constructed by learners through their interactions with their surroundings, asking questions, and making connections between

new information and their existing knowledge (Tran & Vuong, 2023; Melouka & Hayat, 2022). This process is often ongoing, with learners refining and revising their understanding over time as they encounter new experiences or information. Generally, constructivism highlights the value of students' active participation in the learning process and how their prior experiences and knowledge shape their perceptions of the material they are learning. Adopting a constructivist approach is believed to be a powerful educational strategy that can assist students in enhancing their critical thinking skills and developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter, while also fostering their autonomy and self-directed learning (Little, 2007; Melouka & Hayat, 2022). Through knowledge construction, individuals shift from being the product of their society to becoming producers themselves (Little, 2007; Melouka & Hayat, 2022).

2.2 Why stimulate learner autonomy?

According to Smith et al. (2018), research on learner autonomy in Morocco is considered limited. This is because most research on autonomy has focused on learners from well-resourced Western or East Asian settings. However, Khotimah et al. (2019) suggest that the concept of learner autonomy is gaining popularity in Indonesia. There is a significant body of research and knowledge on learner autonomy in countries such as the Netherlands, Turkey, Indonesia, and China, as evidenced by studies conducted by researchers such as Benneker & van Atteveldt (2023), Yaşar & Atay (2023), Pratiwi & Waluyo (2023), and Bai & Gu (2022).

The strategic vision introduced by the Moroccan Ministry of Education emphasizes the importance of student autonomy and independence. In higher education, student autonomy is crucial for pedagogical purposes. It involves moving away from traditional teaching approaches that treat students as passive recipients of information, and towards more constructive and autonomous learning. Autonomous learning requires students to take responsibility for their learning and to actively construct knowledge based on their own experiences, rather than simply following instructions. The evolution of technology and the abundance of information available have also led to changes in language teaching and ways of acquiring knowledge. Students are expected to become more self-directed, taking control of their own learning and assuming greater responsibility for their education (Khotimah, 2019; Aminatun & Oktaviani, 2019). Quoc Lap (2005) suggests that this shift from passive to active learning is fundamental to autonomous learning and requires a deep understanding of the role of learners in the learning process.

In the context of language learning, students are able to recognize the crucial role they play in achieving success through various forms of classroom interaction, peer collaboration, and individual communication with their teachers. As they develop a dynamic and autonomous profile, learners are empowered to take an active approach to addressing their personal learning needs and making progress. This not only enhances their self-esteem and personal knowledge but also boosts their confidence, positivity, and task-related skills (Tran & Duong, 2018; Tran & Vuong, 2023).

Various researchers have suggested that EFL learner autonomy development is influenced by certain factors, which can be divided into two main categories: internal and external. Internal factors refer to those that arise from the learners themselves, while external factors relate to the learning environment, including teachers, peers, and curricula (Nguyen & Habók, 2020). Tran & Vuong (2023) further explain that internal factors consist of psychological aspects, learning habits and strategies, positivism, constructivism, critical theory, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and developed skills and awareness. In contrast, external factors are associated with teachers, tasks, and the learning environment. Godwin-Jones (2019) categorizes internal variables as learner initiative, persistence, and creativity, and external variables as teachers and the educational system. Khotimah et al. (2019) suggest that internal factors include students' mindset, culture, and learning habits, whereas external factors include teachers' educational background and age. It is important to note that both internal and external

factors can be either negative or positive, depending on how they are addressed and the extent to which they are stimulated (Nguyen & Habók, 2020).

2.3 How to stimulate learner autonomy?

The fundamental concept of learner autonomy is the idea of having control over one's learning. Benson and Lor (1998) identified three types of learning strategies that autonomous learners exhibit: technical, psychological, and political. The positivist perspective supports a technical version of autonomy that emphasizes the discovery of knowledge and natural learning in the classroom. The constructivist approach to language learning aligns with the psychological version of autonomy, which emphasizes students' attitudes, personalities, and behaviors. The critical theory supports the political-social version of autonomy, which involves becoming critically conscious of societal constraints in language learning. Language education has shifted its focus towards meeting course objectives rather than serving students' needs, and textbooks often exclude political issues. Artificial language learning can occur through counterfeit materials, where teachers take on the role of native speakers.

Littlewood (1999) identified two principles of self-regulation: proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy involves learners defining their own learning objectives and deciding on methods and techniques to track their progress. Reactive autonomy occurs when learners are motivated to take the initiative in their learning, such as acquiring new vocabulary, self-examining their learning, or choosing to learn in groups. The difference between proactive and reactive autonomy is that proactive learners make things happen, while reactive learners wait for things to happen and then react to them.

Scharle and Szabo (2000) categorized learner autonomy into three main categories: raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. The first step towards growth is to raise awareness, and in this step, the teacher controls all the learning because the students are still beginners. The teacher introduces elements that are relevant to learning and explains them to students carefully, and each step is elaborated in harmony with its targeted objectives. This helps students to understand what they are doing, how and why they are doing it, and what awaits them. When students begin to apply what they have learned, they experience a change in attitude. However, this level demands patience because students need to do extensive practice and comprehend their new practices, including shifting away from old learning habits. Learners with low abilities require concentration and persistence. At this level, activities should be reproducible to consider the learners' opening moves. In the transferring roles stage, students take the role of their teacher, and the teacher becomes a facilitator and counselor. Students become more active and productive, and there is as much freedom as possible at the level of tasks and activities done in class.

In his work, Nunan (2014) presents a five-step approach to promoting learner autonomy. The first step is "awareness", during which learners are made aware of the course goals and content through their teachers. This initial step is aimed at motivating learners to determine implicit learning strategies described in the curriculum. However, it is noted that teachers should set clear goals for students to become self-directed learners. Nunan emphasizes that such educational goals must be present throughout the entire course, from start to finish.

Moving on to the second step, "involvement" is identified as a critical step in bridging the gap between raising students' awareness of course goals and implementing changes in learning materials. In the "intervention" stage, students take action by making changes to the goals, content, and tasks. In Nunan's model, the first two stages are focused on helping students become aware of the goals and content and getting involved in the learning process. In the third stage, "creation", learners are enabled to actively participate in creating new activities that build upon what they have learned so far. This stage involves modifying and enhancing the activities provided in the textbook. Learners are encouraged to develop their own learning goals, content, and tasks, and are given the freedom to create their own materials, which leads them to become autonomous learners. For instance, students working in groups are given a listening text and asked to develop their comprehension questions related to the audio. This process requires them to master the content of the audio before creating the questions. Later, students

exchange their questions with other groups and try to answer them. Finally, the whole class engages in a discussion. By reaching this stage, learners become more autonomous in their learning.

In the final stage of Nunan's model, called "transcendence," learners start to connect what they have learned in the classroom to real-life situations outside the classroom. This stage involves applying the knowledge and skills they have acquired in their everyday lives. It is about taking learning beyond the classroom and making it a part of one's personal and social experiences.

According to Wiraningsih & Santosa (2020), it is the responsibility of teachers to promote learner autonomy. Researchers have conducted studies on how to promote learner autonomy and have found that cooperative learning (Shi & Han, 2019), online learning media such as Schoology (Baru et al., 2020), reflective practice (Şener & Mede, 2023), and project-based learning (Aminah et al., 2023) are effective methods. However, Wiraningsih & Santosa (2020) identified some among several challenges encountered by EFL teachers in promoting learner autonomy in 21st-century education, including educational and institutional policies, language teaching, and the learners' backgrounds. This indicates that teachers may face difficulties in promoting learner autonomy and may not always succeed due to various factors.

3. Research Methods

The present study used a cross-sectional survey research design to collect data. A quantitative approach was employed to generate and interpret quantitative data. The study utilized a non-experimental design, and a self-completion questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The participants of the study were Moroccan undergraduate students from the Department of English at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdulah University, Dhar El Mehraz Faculty. The study aimed to collect data from students who were enrolled in the university during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique. Background information on the participants, including their gender (females and males), age, and level at the university (first, second-, or third-year students, or those who have spent more than three years at the university), was collected at the beginning of the study. The collected background information was used to describe the sample characteristics and to analyze the data.

A self-completion questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument for this study. The questionnaire was based on Nunan's (2014) model of learner autonomy, which outlines five characteristics of learner autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. The questionnaire indirectly tested these characteristics to determine whether respondents were aware of their autonomy, involved in decision-making about their learning, able to influence their learning materials and goals, able to create their own learning tasks and activities, and able to apply what they learn in class beyond the classroom.

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants via email. The participants were informed about the study's purpose and were asked to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collection process took place over a period of two weeks. The collected data were coded and entered into the computer using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Software (SPSS) version 19. The data were analyzed using quantitative procedures, specifically descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the strategies or techniques that students have used to promote their autonomy during the Covid-19 outbreaks.

4. Results

In this section, we present results that the researcher collected in order to measure learner autonomy during Covid 19 pandemic using Nunan's (2014) model.
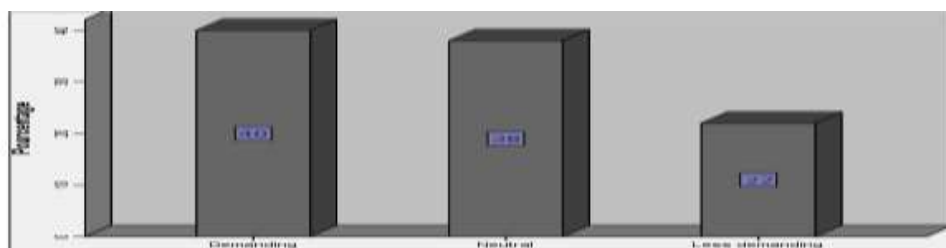
4.1 Awareness

Figure 1. Students' first year at the university

To check respondents' awareness of their role, they were asked to describe their first year at the university. Forty percent (40%) of them claim that it was demanding, while 22% consider it as less demanding. Meanwhile, 38% of the participants believe that their first-year experience at the university was neither demanding nor less demanding.

Table 1. I was introduced to the difference between secondary and higher education when I joined the university.

		Effectifs	Pourcentage	Pourcentage valide	Pourcentage cumulé
Valide	Yes	64	64,0	64,0	64,0
	No	36	36,0	36,0	100,0
	Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Another question to make sure that they were introduced to their role yield results as shown in **(Table 1)**, 64% of the respondents opted for 'Yes,' while 36% opted for 'No.'

Table 2. I had my role explained by my teacher

		Effectifs	Pourcentage	Pourcentage valide	Pourcentage cumulé
Valide	Yes	31	31,0	31,0	31,0
	No	69	69,0	69,0	100,0
	Total	100	100,0	100,0	

To double-check, they were asked to answer with 'yes' or 'no' to the statement, "I had my role explained by my teacher." The findings indicated that although the participants claimed that they were introduced to the differences between secondary educational level and higher educational level, 69% opted for No. In contrast, only 31% of the participants opted for 'Yes.'
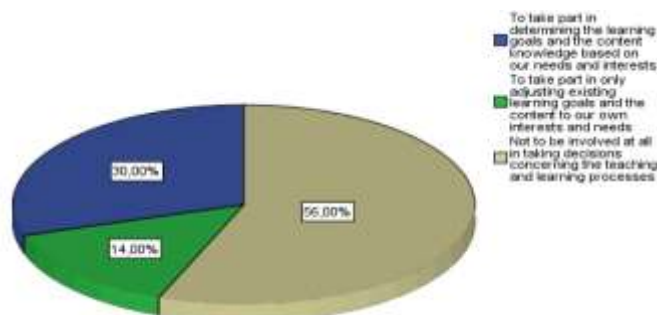
4.2 Involvement

Figure 2. During the lockdown, our teacher took the decision that my classmates and I were

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Based on Figure 2, the majority of students (56%) were not granted the chance to decide what to learn, while 30% of respondents claim that their teacher allowed them to take part in determining the learning goals and the content knowledge based on their needs and interests. In the same vein, 14% of the participants could adjust only existing learning goals and the content to their own interests and needs.

Participants were asked whether they have the readiness to be involved in taking decisions concerning what they learn. Their answers were as follows:
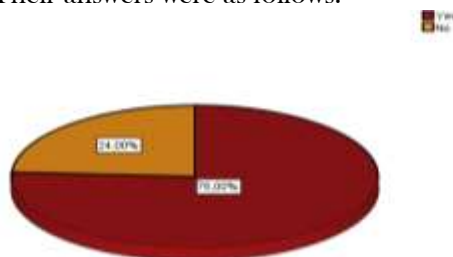

Figure 3. I feel satisfied when my teacher set everything I need, for me, to learn

As depicted **(in Figure 3)**, 76% of the participants answered the question with 'Yes,' while only 24% of the respondents demonstrated their readiness to be part of decision-making concerning the learning goals, the content, and tasks.

4.3 Intervention

Table 3. Effective learning takes place when students collaborate with their teacher in taking decisions about learning goals, materials, and content

		Effectifs	Pourcentage	Pourcentage valide	Pourcentage cumulé
Valide	Agree	49	49,0	49,0	49,0
	Strongly agree	37	37,0	37,0	86,0
	Neutral	12	12,0	12,0	98,0
	Strongly disagree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
	Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Based on **(Table 3)**, 49% of the participants agreed that collaboration between the teacher and his/her student is key for effective and efficient learning. Thirty-seven percent of the participants strongly agreed with the statement. While 12% were neutral. Meanwhile, no one (0%) of them opted for 'Disagree,' but 2% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement.

4.4 Creation

Table 4. During Covid 19 pandemic, I was allowed to change the content that my teacher gave me and adapt it to my learning interests and aims.

		Effectifs	Pourcentage	Pourcentage valide	Pourcentage cumulé
Valide	Yes	38	38,0	38,0	38,0
	No	62	62,0	62,0	100,0
	Total	100	100,0	100,0	

As noticed in **(Table 4)**, only 38 % of the respondents were able to adapt ready-made content. On the contrary, 62% of the participants were not able to do so.

The aim of the following question is to see whether students, during Covid 19 pandemic, were able to set their own learning goals, create their own learning materials, and put things into practice as well as develop tasks without waiting for their teacher to direct them. The responses to such questions are displayed below:
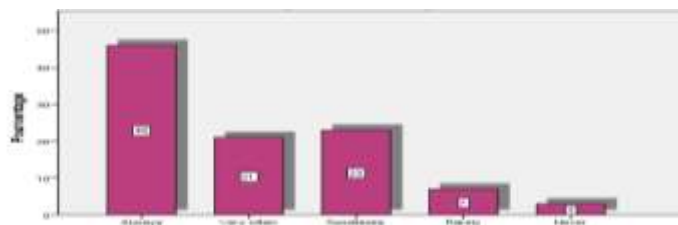

Figure 4. Although my teacher gave me materials, I looked for other sources
to enrich my background knowledge.

Diagram 2 shows that 46% of the respondents answered with 'always,' only (21%) went for very often, and 23% selected sometimes. Yet, merely 7% of the respondents say that they rarely look for other materials apart from the ones suggested by their teacher. Furthermore, 3% of the participants state that they limit themselves to what their teacher supplies them with.

4.5 Transcendence

Table 5. Students need to know the link between what they study in class and life outside the classroom

		Effectifs	Pourcentage	Pourcentage valide	Pourcentage cumulé
Valide	Agree	56	56,0	56,0	56,0
	Strongly agree	32	32,0	32,0	88,0
	Neutral	10	10,0	10,0	98,0
	Strongly disagree	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
	Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Based on Table 7, the majority of students (56%) agreed that there should be a link between what they study in class and life beyond the classroom, 32% strongly agreed, and 10% were neutral. No one participant (0%) disagreed, meanwhile, 2% strongly disagreed with the statement.

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the level of independence among Moroccan undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language during the Covid-19 outbreak. The findings reveal that insufficient guidance and direction in the classroom led to students describing their first year as difficult and stressful, with some even likening it to war and feeling confused and trapped. The global implementation of emergency remote teaching in response to the Covid-19 lockdown had far-reaching effects on educational systems and the mental well-being of both students and faculty members (Ahmady et al., 2020; Odriozola-Gonza´lez et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). Napierala et al. (2022) and Husky et al. (2020) suggest that the transition from high school to postsecondary education, including university, can be a complex and stressful experience. University life involves not only academic changes but also personal, social, and lifestyle transitions that can be challenging, particularly during the first year of studies. Students are susceptible to withdrawing early during this crucial period of adjustment. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown a negative impact on students' mental and physical health, as well as their academic experiences, as reported in a study of students from 14 Canadian universities (Linden et al., 2021). Napierala et al. (2022) specifically examine the challenges faced by incoming post-secondary education students during the pandemic, including difficulties in making friends and maintaining mental health. The online learning environment was also reported to

have a negative effect on students' learning experiences, with many struggling to stay focused during classes, communicate with peers and educators, understand new content, and manage their coursework. Additionally, according to Maunder et al. (2013), cultural experience, personal identity, and social factors are salient in accounts of transitioning from one educational level to another.

The first year of the participants in this study represented a significant transition in their lives, with increased demands and a sense of needing to put in extra effort. They were required to learn in a way that was different from what they were used to in secondary school, and this mismatch between their previous learning experiences and the expectations at the university level created a sense of incompatibility. According to Huba and Freed (2000), secondary school students tend to passively receive knowledge from their teachers, which can result in a mismatch between their beliefs and the reality of university-level learning. Above all, as results demonstrated, their teachers did not allow either involvement in decision-making concerning the course content, nor creation of their own materials. Likewise, respondents seemed needy of much assistance, as they showed reluctance and lack of readiness to be involved, and they feel contented with what the teacher provided them with, the absence of technical and political strategies that Benson and Lor (1998) discussed are apparent.

Traditional classroom instruction and assessment help students identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as prepare for standardized tests. However, according to Blesa and Ripollés (2020), with the pandemic, developing autonomy as a beginner is not a simple task, as it requires persistence and practice. The current job market requires professionals who possess both technical and soft skills. However, the research discovered that a considerable number of Moroccan undergraduate students did not have an awareness of their responsibility as independent and self-reliant learners, and this problem was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic's interruption of face-to-face instruction. Remote learning was adopted as the sole solution for educational institutions, but its effectiveness was uncertain, according to Kuhfeld et al. (2020).

As pointed out by Reich et al. (2020) and Reimers & Schliecher (2020), school leaders and teachers faced difficulties ensuring academic continuity and making decisions regarding instruction due to the disruption caused by Covid-19 all over the world. Varela & Fedynich (2020) conducted a survey study on the impact of Covid-19 on school leadership in South Texas and found that 63% of school leaders believed their district lacked the necessary resources for high-quality remote instruction. Evidence suggests that the measures taken by schools may not have been as effective as hoped, as Almahasees et al. (2021) found that students faced challenges when attending online classes and that online education is less effective than in-person instruction. Challenges included difficulty adapting to online courses, lack of interaction with instructors and peers, lack of motivation, and time management. Lieberman (2020) reported that many teachers had no contact with a significant portion of their students. Comparably, in this paper, a substantial number of participants could not reach their college teachers. According to Lake & Dusseault (2020), few school systems provided plans to support students who needed accommodations or other special populations. Arora and Srinivasan (2020) highlighted several challenges faced by teachers during the online teaching-learning process, including network issues, lack of training, awareness, interest, attendance, personal touch, and interaction. The lack of training for teachers impacted their ability to effectively use technology for teaching, as noted by Sudevan (2020) and Almaiah et al. (2020). On the other hand, Asserraji (2021) conducted research to investigate Moroccan students' views on the impact of Covid-19 distance learning. The study revealed that 50% of the participants believed that they did not require assistance from a family member or institution during the confinement period while engaging in the learning process.

To target the second aim of this paper, respondents were asked to provide some of the strategies they use to promote their autonomy. Based on the findings, it was noticed that some students agreed on the same techniques or strategies to learn English as a second language, while others implied their own learning strategies and techniques. Some participants, use extensive reading and listening to the radio, music, or news. Some use the internet, such as Google Scholar, to look for articles and books that

enable them to expand their knowledge. In this sense, Attar and Aqachmar (2022) carried out research to investigate how YouTube affects the progress of English-speaking skills among Moroccan university students enrolled in the English department. The findings showed that YouTube plays a crucial role in this regard and is considered the most efficient and dependable platform for self-learning. The study also highlighted the ways in which students typically use YouTube and the significant impact it has on their speaking abilities. Finally, there was a consensus that YouTube has more favorable attributes than unfavorable ones.

In a similar study conducted by Ardini & Saputri (2022), students' personal strategies for enhancing their autonomy were examined, and it was found that most of them relied on the Internet for translation and other purposes. The participants in the present study also reported using critical thinking to analyze and summarize the content in their own words, as it is one of the crucial soft skills required for university students. As a matter of fact, 40% of the respondents in this study practiced critical thinking skills. Moreover, in order to improve their English proficiency, the students watched English teaching channels on YouTube, utilized self-management skills such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their progress, and engaged in group discussions or project-based learning with other students. Nonetheless, Benabderrazik and Benhima (2021) conducted a study to explore the strategies employed by Moroccan undergraduate English students in response to the shift to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that students were mainly driven by extrinsic motivation as they were primarily studying for grades. The researchers identified four categories of learning strategies that were employed, listed from most commonly used to least commonly used: self-organization, seeking help from others, managing time and study environment, and engaging in peer learning.

In Malaysia, Kamaludin et al. (2020) conducted a research study to investigate how university students coped with stress and anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic and to explore their socio-psychological well-being. The study aimed to determine which students utilized coping strategies during this time. The researchers observed that the students tended to rely on maladaptive coping strategies, such as acceptance and mental disengagement, rather than adaptive coping strategies, such as humanitarian and seeking social support. In addition, the use of acceptance and seeking social support differed significantly between students who were highly anxious and those who were less anxious. The choice of coping strategies varied depending on factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, level and type of study, and living arrangement. Nonetheless, a substantial number of respondents expressed a desire to be involved in decision-making processes related to learning goals, content, and tasks (Tran, 2020; Little, 2007). Moreover, the majority of students sought out additional learning materials beyond those provided by their teachers.

In this study, participants indicated that they received reading materials via email. Similarly, Bachiri and Sahli (2020) noted that Moroccan teachers used WhatsApp to exchange educational materials, such as PowerPoint and PDF presentations, videos, and audio content. The teachers also shared lessons through links to YouTube, which aimed to promote a student-centered approach to instruction and enhance the learning experience by accommodating individual learning styles and multiple intelligences. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, the study revealed significant structural obstacles to online learning in Morocco, including infrastructure, pedagogical methods, content, and evaluation. Consequently, these challenges are impeding the advancement and effectiveness of remote education.

To address the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Moroccan Ministry of Education and universities have implemented measures to provide students with access to education using various information and communication technology (ICT) tools. These include websites such as TelmidTICE, Moutamadriss, Massar, and Taalim.ma, as well as media channels like Arryadia and Attakafia, which broadcast university courses. In addition, some universities, like Ibn Zohr and Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, have been utilizing local radio channels to deliver lectures to their students.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to evaluate the level of autonomy of Moroccan undergraduate students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study also intends to create awareness of the strategies and techniques that students use to enhance their independence and autonomy. The statistical analysis conducted showed that a considerable number of EFL students were not conscious of their role as independent learners during the pandemic. In addition, only a small portion of them were engaged in syllabus design. Despite these findings, almost half of the EFL students expressed their willingness to take part in decision-making regarding the teaching and learning process. The implication that can be drawn from this study is that students need to be aware of their role, as awareness is a key to successful learning and the promotion of learner autonomy. Students must not only raise their awareness about their role but also about their learning goals and content. Additionally, students should demonstrate their readiness to create their learning materials and use what they learn in class beyond the classroom. The researcher believes that this study does not yield enough information about all Moroccan EFL undergraduates. Thus, the study cannot be generalized to all Moroccan students since it was based on only one faculty in Morocco. Perhaps a combination of several faculties would yield different results and richer findings.

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Appendix

The questionnaire the researcher employed to gauge the participants' level of autonomy during Covid-19

1. Gender
    1. Female
    2. Male
2. Age
    1. 19-21
    2. Above
3. How would you describe your experience at the university, especially, in your first year?
    1. Demanding
    2. Neutral
    3. Less demanding

    Would you please explain why?

    ....
4. I was introduced to the difference between secondary education (lycée) and higher education immediately after I joined the university.
    1. Yes
    2. No
5. I had my role, as a university student, explained by my teacher.
    1. Yes
    2. No

    If yes, could you explain how your teacher described your role?

    ....
6. During the lockdown our teacher took the decision that my classmates and I were
    1. To take part in determining the learning goals and the content knowledge based on our needs and interests.
    2. To take part in only adjusting existing learning goals and the content to our own interests and needs.
    3. Not to be involved at all in taking decisions concerning the teaching and learning processes.
7. I feel satisfied when my teacher set everything I need, for me, to learn.
    1. Yes
    2. No

8. Effective learning takes place when students collaborate with their teacher in taking decisions about learning goals, the materials and the content
   1. Agree
   2. Strongly agree
   3. Neutral
   4. Disagree
   5. Strongly disagree
9. During Covid 19 pandemic, I was allowed to change the content that my teacher gave me and adapt it to my learning interests and aims.
   1. Yes
   2. No
10. Although my teacher gave me materials, I looked for other sources to enrich my background knowledge.
    1. Always
    2. Very often
    3. Sometimes
    4. Rarely
    5. Never
    What other strategies you have been using and that you think improved your level in learning English and enhance your autonomy especially during Covid-19?
11. students need to know the link between what they study in class and life outside the classroom
    6. Agree
    7. Strongly agree
    8. Neutral
    9. Disagree
    10. Strongly disagree