

# Teachers' Quest for Fostering Learner Autonomy: Exploring Desirability, Feasibility, and Constrains

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Promoting learner autonomy is widely recognized as an important goal in education. However, while the principles of autonomy are highly desirable, the actual practice and development of autonomous learning skills can be challenging for many students. This study aims to explore the extent to which 21 university EFL professors perceive autonomous skills as desirable or feasible, shedding light on the factors affecting teachers' quest for promoting those skills. The study adopted a mixed-method approach in which data from both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were collected and analysed. Results showed that almost all the autonomous learning skills were perceived to be more desirable than feasible. Thus, teachers, at the level of the decision making regarding some aspects such as choosing materials and the course objectives, generally showed lack of trust in their students' capacity to have a say in these aspects and in others. Also, most of the teachers reported some contextual constraints for promoting it. Several implications and recommendations were included.

*Autonomous skills; decision making; learner autonomy; EFL students.*

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## 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a buzzword for decades in language education. It has certainly helped shift the philosophy of language teaching and learning. In the midst of the heyday of humanistic approaches, especially towards 1980s, learner autonomy started to emerge as one of the exemplifying and practical theorizations of learner-centred approach (Littlewood, 1996). Although the concept of self-directed learning had already been there before as discussed by Knowles (1975), Smith (2008) noted that the term "learner autonomy" was much needed to describe someone who can take responsibility for his/her own learning. In fact, learner autonomy is also favoured for its application in the classroom. That is, it is usually tied to its promotion in class among learners. The fact that autonomy can actually be developed is what makes the teachers' role indispensable.

Within this autonomy oriented approach, the teacher's role changes now from the sole authority in the classroom to a catalyst, facilitator, and guide (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005). Little (1991) argues that the teacher-learner relationship should be interdependent because total detachment usually results in individuals being autistic learners who will deprive themselves from social interaction. This teacher-learner dialogic relationship is advocated by Benson (2010) when he states that autonomy does not imply the "freedom from the influence of teachers, institutions, materials and so on, or learning by oneself" (p. 80). Learners who learn completely on their own, either choosing or being forced by certain circumstances to do so, may not be able to develop autonomy, as their "independent efforts to control learning are often episodic and ineffective" (Benson, 2011, p. 91), which therefore makes the teacher's role in promoting this capacity in learners crucial (Benson, 2011; Nakata, 2011; Smith, 2000). This fostering of learner autonomy by teachers does not imply "leaving learners to their own devices", but it means "a more active process of guidance and encouragement to help learners extend and systematize the capacities that they already possess" (Benson, 2011, p. 91).

Despite Moroccan official documents, such as the National Charter of Education and Training (1999) and the Strategic Vision (2015-2030), emphasizing the importance of learner autonomy, there has been a lack of empirical research on the topic within the Moroccan context. While autonomy has been officially recognized as an important educational goal, it remains under-researched, especially concerning teachers' perceptions and their actual practices in promoting it. Ultimately, understanding teachers' beliefs is a prerequisite to fully grasping their motives to developing learner autonomy in the classroom. In this study, the purpose is to examine university professors' perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of autonomous skills that students should possess. It also aims at explaining professors' views of the factors affecting its implementation in their classrooms. The following are three central research questions of the present study:

1. How desirable and feasible do Moroccan EFL professors feel it is to promote learner autonomy?
2. To what extent do they say they promote learner autonomy and how do they do it?
3. What factors do they perceive as affecting the implementation of learner autonomy?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. The concept**

Being one of the leading figures in the political philosophy in the eighteenth century, Rousseau (1712) represents his view on education in his works in which he suggests a model of education based on children's natural will (as cited in Benson, 2011). This line of thought advises that people learn what they like, and when they like to learn it, and the

teacher remains as both a supporter for learners as well as a learner himself. Within this framework, the learner becomes his own authority regarding his learning, which gave rise to the notion of natural education supporting the idea that children should learn on their own. Rousseau's idea of learners being responsible for their learning is thus, according to Benson (2011), key to autonomy. This researcher, also, states that Rousseau's notion of natural learning where he advocates the idea that learners learn better when they are engaged in direct contact with nature to some extent has proliferated in the modern approaches encouraging the use of authentic materials of the target language in the classroom, which is discussed in autonomy related literature.

For over four decades now, the promotion of learner autonomy has become an important objective in language learning. This concept, defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), places the learner at the center of the learning process. Theoretically, promoting learner autonomy has been associated with motivation, self-regulation, and higher achievements in learning. The literature points to the teacher's role as the most critical variable in its successful implementation. Teachers are no longer seen as mere disseminators of knowledge but as facilitators who can create a supportive environment and provide students with the necessary tools and opportunities to become independent learners (Benson, 2007). Therefore, a key focus in research has been on how teachers conceptualize autonomy in their classrooms.

## **2.2. The importance of teacher autonomy in learner autonomy**

Dickison (1987), as cited in El Jawhari (1988), suggests that one way teachers can promote learner autonomy is by making students aware of alternative learning strategies. Furthermore, for teachers to be able to effectively foster learner autonomy, they must be autonomous learners themselves, having willingness to develop their own skills and knowledge, such as improving their teaching methods (Lamb, 2008; Little, 1995; Nakata, 2011). Teacher-learner autonomy is defined as the ability to develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for teaching both independently and in collaboration with others (Smith & Erdogan, 2008). It emphasizes a teacher's capacity to manage their own professional learning and the importance of reflecting on that process as well as on their actual teaching practices (Smith, 2000). Ultimately, these researchers argue that teacher autonomy should be encouraged through both theoretical frameworks and teacher development programs.

Teachers should reflect on their classroom practices and evaluate the resulting implications for learner autonomy. According to Benson (2011), teachers themselves must demonstrate a degree of autonomy in their approaches to both teaching and learning. Smith and Erdogan (2008) distinguish between two required dimensions: professional action (related to teaching) and professional development (related to learning). They emphasize that being self-directed in one area does not automatically ensure autonomy in the other.

Teachers are thus encouraged to reflect on both aspects to enhance their own autonomy and that of their learners (Smith, 2000). This process requires a fundamental shift in the teacher's role from an authority holder to a facilitator and advisor (Voller, 1997). Sturtridge (1997) asserts that teachers require professional training to master this role, paradoxically needing to be taught not to teach students, but to guide them. This is essential because, as Wlodkowski (2008) explains, students often avoid responsibility when instructors control all elements of the learning environment, such as setting requirements and goals, giving assignments, and administering tests.

To foster learner autonomy, teachers must first believe in their students' ability to be autonomous learners (Breen & Mann, 1997; Martinez, 2008). These researchers also argue that a prerequisite for developing learner autonomy is for teachers to recognize that they are learners themselves. Similarly, La Ganza (2008) suggests that the kind of relationship between the teacher and the learner is a determining factor in whether or not learner autonomy can be developed. In fact, the literature demonstrates that research on learner autonomy is grounded in practice (Little, 2007). That is to say, researching and developing learner autonomy has to start from the classroom setting where the key participants (learners and teachers) should be involved. It is in this belief that this study intends to examine how teachers perceive learner autonomy in relation to their students and how they see the opportunities of developing it in their classes.

### **2.3 Previous empirical research**

The majority of the studies cited here are replications of previous work of Borg and Al Busaidi (2012b) and appeared in a single edited book by Barnard & Li (2016). The focus on these studies stems from the fact that they replicated the seminal work which the present study was inspired by. The different studies published in the edited collection were investigated in various Asian countries. These studies found out that teachers' conceptions of learner autonomy vary, but commonly revolve around notions of control and responsibility. Teachers are generally positive about the concept at least in theory. In other words, they view it as both a desirable educational goal and a crucial skill for second language learning. However, in practice, they are less optimistic about its implementation. Across these studies, the majority of teachers showed lack of balance between believing in desirability and feasibility of various autonomous skills among their students. For example, while teachers perceive learners being able to have a say in the content to be studied and taught in class as highly desirable, they believe it is not feasible in practice. This gap between desirability and feasibility is often attributed to external factors, which are largely institutional (such as prescribed curricula) or learner-related (such as a lack of student motivation).

Van Loi (2016) conducted a study on Vietnamese teachers' beliefs and practices of autonomy and found out that these teachers acknowledged the importance of promoting learner autonomy and emphasized their vital role in doing so, while, however, they were observed to show a lack of trust regarding their students' ability to assume control over their

own learning. Another study on Chinese teachers' perceived autonomy related practices by Wang and Wang (2016) showed that the teachers fairly understood the concept of autonomy but were inhibited by some contextual factors including those related to students, teaches, and the institution, a finding that corroborates that of Haji-Othman and Wood (2016).

Keuk and Heng (2016) carried out a study on Cambodian EFL teachers' perspectives and practices of learner autonomy and found out that these teachers emphasized the importance of enhancing autonomy in students, but that some teachers did not aim to promote it. These researches ascribed this lack of some teachers' unwillingness to promote autonomy, based on the teachers' views, to the challenge of prescribed curricula. Stroupe et al. (2016) investigated Japanese EFL teachers' perceptions and readiness for promoting learner autonomy and found out that the teachers demonstrated an appreciation of the concept and willingness to develop it. However, according to these researchers, teachers reported some obstacles which persisted in the way of the implementation process, most notably rigid course goals and students' low level of proficiency and motivation. These studies shed light on teachers' generally positive theoretical dispositions to the concept. However, they were observed to be less in line with feasibility of promoting a number of skills and strategies for learner autonomy. Part of their less optimistic view was ascribed to factors such as lack of teacher autonomy, learners' adverse attributes such as lack of motivation, confidence, and limited experience of autonomous learning, etc., and some institutional issues.

The literature above exposes a complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices. The studies cited above show that the majority of teachers hold desirable beliefs about learner autonomy, logically agreeing with its importance. However, there is a significant gap between their beliefs in theory and their perceived application. This discrepancy is attributed to a variety of factors. For instance, teachers state that they feel constrained by institutional demands, such as a fixed curriculum or standardized tests that they have to follow, which limits their flexibility. This may also constrain teachers' freedom to discuss with their students several things that the latter need to engage in, such as contributing to the content to be studied and taught. As a result of this, the teacher might show in the classroom as the sole authority and students might get used to that. Teachers may, thus, face resistance from students who are accustomed to a teacher-centered model and are reluctant to take on greater responsibility for their own learning (Little, 2007). This suggests that while a shift in teacher beliefs is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own to foster learner autonomy as all the stakeholders need to discuss the issue in question.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Context and participants**

This study was conducted with 21 university professors who teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels at the department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The group included both males and

females with varying teaching experience, from one year to over 15 years. This demographic information was not used in the analysis of the current study, as it is not a relevant variable and previous research has not shown any significant differences based on these factors.

### **3.2 Data collection instruments and procedures**

In this study, we used mixed-methods approach comprising both quantitative and qualitative strands. The study combined a questionnaire to gather quantitative data with semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. Following the guidelines of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this approach allowed for a comprehensive data collection to address the research problem more rigorously. The decision to use both quantitative and qualitative methods was supported by Dornyei (2007), who argues that each method offers a complementary view of the research topic. For one thing, this approach enables the researcher to take the advantage of the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For another thing, thus, one approach offsets the limitations of the other (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This rigorous approach was deemed necessary for investigating a complex topic like teachers' beliefs on a construct like autonomy which needs a combination of methods to fully understand the phenomenon.

The present study examined teachers' perceptions regarding several aspects of learner autonomy in terms of desirability and feasibility of the skills for developing it and other aspects using a slightly modified version of an original questionnaire from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b). The scale was selected for its high relevance and its alignment with the study's aim. Participants responded to items on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 representing "undesirable" or "unfeasible" to 4 "very desirable" or "very feasible". Due to the modifications, the questionnaire's internal consistency was checked using Cronbach's Alpha, a standard reliability test. The result indicated an acceptable level of reliability (.89), according to Bryman (2012).

In addition, ten teachers were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of learner autonomy, mainly their perceptions of the factors affecting LA integration. The interviews were particularly useful because they provided a way to document "how things are experienced" (Leavy, 2017, p. 5), which offers detailed insights into the teachers' actual ideas and practices. In this type of qualitative research, the sample size is typically small and is determined by data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Denscombe, 2010), a point at which no new information emerges from additional interviews. For the study's ethical considerations, special care was taken to ensure the anonymity of all teachers and to use their responses exclusively for research purposes.

### **3.3 Data analysis procedures**

Quantitative data from the study was analyzed using SPSS version 23, where means were calculated for all fourteen items and frequencies for the question of autonomy promotion were ran. For the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews,

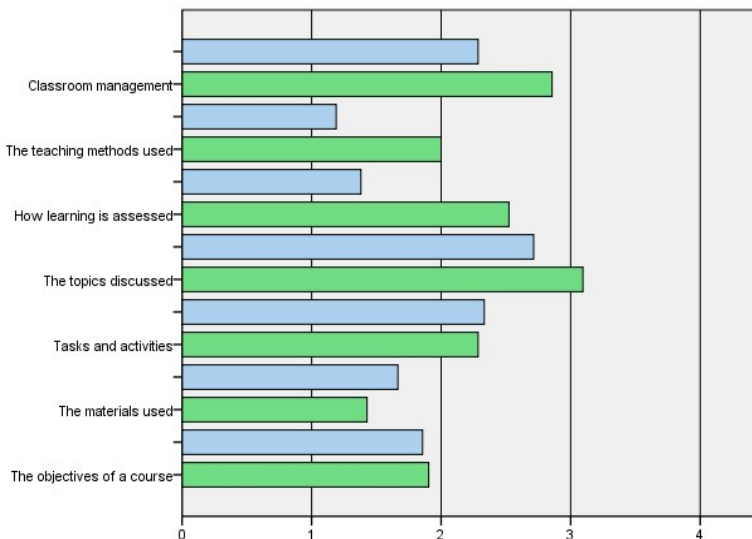
some questions were used to generate thematic categories, while others provided direct answers. To ensure transparency and credibility, selected extracts from teachers' responses were included, stressing that any single interpretation of reality is "only one of several 'right ways'" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 32). This method aimed to demonstrate how the data was interpreted, which thereby establishes the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis. The practical example of how this is done in this study is by citing text data from the actual respondents' speech serving as an example of transparency. While validity and reliability are usually discussed in relation to the quantitative instrument, the notion of trustworthiness appears to substitute the former criteria when dealing with the qualitative methods of data collection. For example, the measurement or construct validity, as the terms indicate, are, in Bryman's (2012) words, "almost by definition" criteria that the researcher relies on to assess the quality of the quantitative research. Also, following some qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), the issue of trustworthiness and authenticity seem to have large bearing on the qualitative research.

#### 4. Results

Having outlined the research method used, the following section presents the results of the present study.

##### **RQ1: The desirability and feasibility of promoting LA**

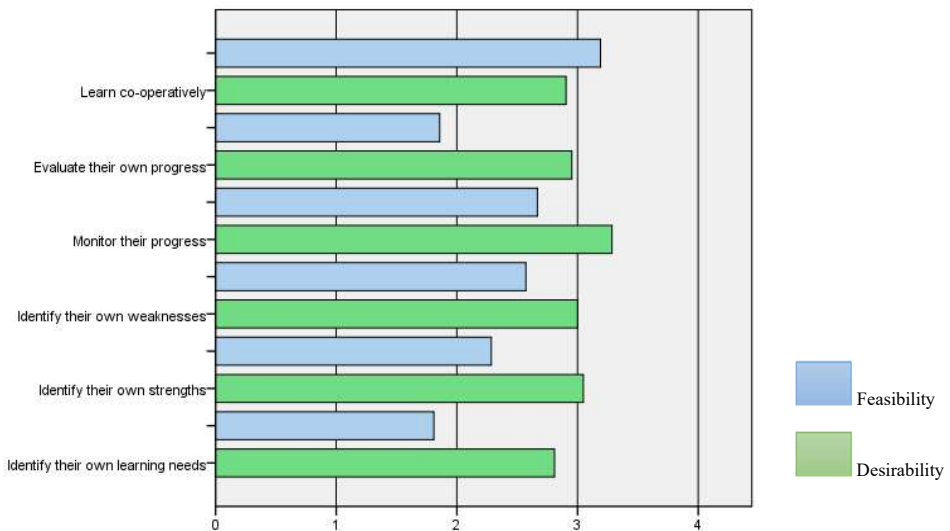
Figure 1 displays the mean figures of the teachers' responses about the desirability and the feasibility of involving students in a number of aspects of decision making.



**Figure 1. Desirability and feasibility of students' involvement in decision making (1 = undesirable/ unfeasible; 4 = very desirable/ feasible)**

Generally, the above figure reveals the teachers' perception that the seven aspects of decision making are more desirably oriented, with the discussion of the topics being the most desirable, yet not equally feasible, aspect of decision making. Classroom management, learning assessment, and tasks and activities follow as above average. However, the materials to be used, the course objectives, and the teaching methods seem to be the least rated areas, both at the level of desirability and feasibility.

In addition to the results of teachers' perceptions of desirability and feasibility of students' involvement in a range of decision making aspects, the following figure shows the mean statistics of the teachers' responses about the desirability and feasibility of students practicing a group of autonomous learning skills.



**Figure 1. Desirability and feasibility of developing skills for learner autonomy (1 = undesirable/ unfeasible; 4 = very desirable/ feasible)**

Figure 2 shows the general teachers' attitude that almost all the autonomous learning skills are more desirable than feasible. Most of the corresponding teachers' perceived feasibility of these skills are above average, with students identifying their own learning needs and evaluating their progress being the lowest.

In the interviews, teachers were invited to elaborate on their students' involvement in decision making in various aspects of autonomy. The results revealed that most of the teachers' responses focused on the idea of learner choice concerning choosing the topics for discussion. For example, T 2 said "I often let them choose topics to discuss in class, including topics for research projects as well. Other than this, the level of involvement varies depending on each class". Another teacher admitted that the level of involvement is

highly limited in her classes. A typical comment here was: “my students are not totally involved in decision making. Depending on the course, I sometimes ask them to discuss the topics they are interested in to present (T1)”. One teacher said he is aware that learners’ involvement includes encouraging them “to make choices regarding learning goals, learning strategies, and even learning materials, but I usually involve them through giving them choice for selecting the topics they want to talk about in class in some courses (T3)”. These were typical examples that summarized the teachers’ practices regarding their involvement of their students’ in decision making. The responses summarised above generally reflect the other teachers’ perceptions.

### **RQ2: Teachers’ perceived degree of promoting LA**

The questionnaire results concerning this question indicated that over half of the teachers agreed (38.1%) or strongly agreed (19%) that they promote learner autonomy in their classes. However, another quite significant number of them either disagreed (14.3%), strongly agreed (4.8%) or remained unsure (23.8%). The teachers who felt they gave opportunities to students to develop autonomy were further probed to give actual examples of the types of strategies they employed to do so. The analysis showed a range of methods which can be clustered into four broad strategies. These included the following:

Encouraging learner choice and use of learning strategies (I try to give my learners freedom of choice concerning the learning materials or at least the topics to be discussed throughout a semester. I also encourage them to use learning strategies, as they are very important to be autonomous, T3).

Facilitating students’ self-assessment (I encourage learners to self-assess their learning by themselves to identify areas for improvement and know their learning progress, T2).

Using activities which promote autonomy (I usually give my students the chance to rely on themselves through working in workshops, group work, or even giving them the opportunity to be teachers and explain certain things to each other, T4).

Getting learners to conduct learning projects (I provide opportunities for learners to be independent by offering self-directed learning projects and guarantee a positive learning environment, T1).

The above examples of the strategies used by the teachers who felt they did promote autonomy in their students are representative of the other teachers’ answers in which one or more of the strategies was reportedly used. Overall, the percentage of teachers who believed that they promoted autonomy (57.1%) and the examples of ways they tried to do so showed their awareness of the concept. However, the activities they said they used may not be sufficient for greater learner autonomy as the latter requires some higher order skills such as goal setting, decision making, etc.

**RQ3: Factors perceived to influence LA promotion**

To explain the perceived desirability and feasibility of student decision making, an open ended question was addressed to the teachers. The question directed the teachers to identify challenges in enhancing learner autonomy. The interview analysis revealed three main issues related to students, teachers, and the institution. Regarding the student-related factor, students' lack of motivation to learn the language was perceived to be a hindrance to their autonomy (Ts 1, 6, and 7). In addition, their lack of confidence to learn independently was another recurring issue (Ts 1, 2, 3, 8, 9). According to T8, "some students' do not believe in themselves, so they rely on their teachers or they wait for some of their classmates to help them". Another issue that was reported by some teachers was the language itself being a barrier to learner autonomy, especially with low achieving students (T2). T4 added that "some learners are used to the spoon feeding method of learning, where they can get everything from one source, which is the teacher. Therefore, they lack the ability to make efforts on their own to learn independently".

In terms of the teacher factors, a common issue among the teachers was that most of the teachers generally wish to maintain control in class and resist to change this practice into a more learner driven learning. T2 stated that there is too much resistance from the part of the teachers to adopt new roles in the classroom. This is explained by T5 statement that "introducing learner autonomy faces resistance as we are accustomed with the teacher-centred approach where we are used to control the class".

At the level of the institution factors, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the rigidity of the curriculum. For example, T2 said the fixed curricula and traditional assessment are a hindrance to promoting learner autonomy. In the same line, T3 reported that in such a traditional education setting where pre-set curricula and traditional assessment which focuses on students' memorization, finding time to develop autonomous learners is challenging". Noticeably, a commonly recurred issue interviewing the teachers was lack of self-confidence in promoting learner autonomy due to lack of teacher training. The teachers admitted that they are in a dire need for training to promote learner autonomy, as this will help them shift from a teacher-centred approach to a learner centred approach (T2). In fact, this question of teacher training could be both a teacher and an institution related factor.

**5. Discussion**

Based on the findings, a clear divide emerges between the ideal of desiring learner autonomy and the difficulty in its feasibility. The professors' perceptions reveal a consistent pattern across the two measures of desirability and feasibility; they view almost all fourteen aspects of learner autonomy as desirable for their students, yet they simultaneously perceive these same aspects as less feasible to implement in their

classrooms. This divergence suggests that while these teachers embrace the principles of student-centered learning and recognize its importance in learners' learning, they, in real life application, face practical barriers to translating their beliefs into a reality. These obstacles, according to the teachers, include three main issues related to students, teachers, and the institution. At the level of the student factor, the issue is related to the psychological and the technical aspects of their learning. The psychological aspect is exemplified in their lack of motivation and confidence, while the technical has to do with their low proficiency in the language concerned. The teacher factor is attributed to some teachers being resistant to change; some wish to maintain control in the classroom. Moreover, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with rigid institutional curricula and the pressure of standardized assessments.

The most notable finding is the high rating of both desirability and feasibility for the discussion of topics to be covered in class. From a desirability perspective, giving students opportunities to choose topics responds to their interests and needs, and makes learning more motivating. From a feasibility perspective, this practice is relatively easy to implement. For example, a teacher can introduce a discussion of topics incrementally, without feeling that they are losing control of the curriculum's core objectives, since the latter must be covered.

Moreover, a major finding of the present study is that teachers' perception of learner autonomy in terms of learner involvement in various decision-making aspects was far less possible. The qualitative analysis corroborated this finding as teachers, although they admitted the importance of involvement, said they could only offer their students opportunities to sometimes discuss the topics they like, preserving of course the choice of the materials to be taught, course objectives and the teaching method for teachers to be decided upon. This lack of involvement may be ascribed to the teaching context wherein these teachers teach. A context where the rigidity of the curriculum and its imposed set of guidelines to follow partly restricted the teachers' freedom to promote autonomy in students, as they have to cover certain prescribed content in a limited period of time.

In congruence with other studies in other contexts (Nguyen, 2014; Van Loi, 2016), this study found out that teachers were not positive about the students' ability to hold responsibility for the decision making in relation to deciding for their own learning process. The study also revealed that, as that of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b) did, teachers' perceptions pointed to the desirability of students' having the right to have their voices across all the aspects of decision making, while the perceived level of feasibility lent to these practices was insignificant. That is not a surprising finding since their views in the follow up interviews explained the reasons among which include the lack of the place of the student's voice in the curriculum. Another possible explanation may be because teachers themselves, as some of them actually mentioned, did not receive any training on

how to promote various aspects of autonomous learning, and even if they would try to do so, other institutional constraints may be in the way.

Concerning developing the capacities for learner autonomy, as in Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012b), this study showed that teachers desired that students develop some skills such as identifying their strengths and weaknesses, setting goals, monitoring their learning, and self-assessing learning. However, in both the present study and Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012b), the desirability of developing these capabilities was found to be consistently higher than their feasibility. Other studies that showed the similar finding include Haji-Othman and Wood (2016), Keuk and Heng (2016), Van Loi (2016) and Wang & Wang (2016). Additionally, a constraint that seemed to be persistent while interviewing the teachers was the student as one of the factors that could be an obstacle to the implementation of autonomy. They believed that students' lack of motivation and limited proficiency were among the problems impeding this process of integration, a finding which is congruent with Stroupe et al. (2016). Nevertheless, these researchers also conducted a workshop in which they suggested various activities that aimed to enhance autonomy in students, and the results were that the teachers changed their beliefs and that they eventually attempted to foster autonomy more in their classrooms. This means that including the workshop component may be a good strategy in affecting teachers' beliefs and in developing autonomy in students.

## **6. Conclusions and implications**

The present study examined Moroccan university EFL professors' perceptions of how autonomy is desired and whether it can be feasible with a focus on the influence of certain factors that may hinder the efforts to implement it in their classes. A central finding of the study is the teachers' less optimistic view of the feasibility of a number of LA related skills and strategies, whereas their perceptions of desirability of these autonomy related aspects was much more positive. This was partly explained by a number of factors including the student, the teacher, and the institution.

The findings have significant implications for both pedagogical practice and future research. Given that professors already agree on the desirability of learner autonomy, professional development programs may shift their focus from the "why" to the "how". Training should provide concrete, practical strategies for addressing the barriers of the student, the teacher, and the institution to feasibility. For example, workshops could demonstrate how to use peer-assessment or how to co-create rubrics with students, thereby making these practices feel more manageable. In composition course where students are asked to write essays, they may be invited to assess their own essays by themselves based on a rubric already created. In this way, students will get used to self-assessment, which is a major aspect of learner autonomy. For future research, it would be beneficial to conduct

qualitative studies to explore the specific institutional and personal barriers that create this gap between desirability and feasibility. Furthermore, investigating whether students' perceptions of desirability and feasibility align with those of their professors could provide valuable insights for bridging this gap.

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