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INVESTIGATING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN MOROCCAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:
The use of self-directed learning in language education has recently triggered considerable controversy. Certainly, no hard research evidence supports the benefits of implementing self-directed learning in the EFL classroom or warns against its potential pitfalls and failings. Neither is there a sound theory that relates the potential of this teaching/learning approach to the requirements, objectives, and aspirations of the EFL classroom. Simply claiming that using self-directed learning will bring about positive changes in the language classroom does not really help. This research study aims to explore university students' attitudes toward self-directed learning and examine its potential utility in higher education in Morocco. Self-directed learning is a form of active learning that aims to empower students, promote their confidence, and allow them to take responsibility for their learning tasks. In this respect, a questionnaire was used as a research tool for data collection and discussion with representative samples to explore and examine the utility of self-directed learning in Moroccan higher education. Participant students reportedly believe that self-directed learning allows them to have more control over their learning and further develop the essential life skills that most hiring managers seek today; however, some challenges should be addressed to better implement self-directed learning in higher education.

Keywords: self-directed learning, 21st-century skills, higher education

1. Introduction

Self-directed learning (SDL) is a learning approach that allows students to participate in the learning process. This includes class practices such as selecting, implementing, and completing different learning tasks. The teacher's role is to provide advice, guidance, and support. Given its present situation, self-directed learning in Moroccan universities has

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not been promoted to a practical level as it still requires several specific conditions. The research study aims to explore and investigate self-directed learning in Moroccan higher education with a particular focus on the current situation and assess the readiness and predisposition of university students to control and monitor the learning process. In addition, this study aims to examine the utility of collaboration and coordination between learners and teachers to incorporate the SDL approach in the learning process to make it easier and more practical for learners to develop the 21st-century skills that most hiring managers are seeking today.

SDL is one of the essential methodologies that play a key role in developing and consolidating students' learning and education. SDL provides an opportunity for students to learn and develop essential life skills that they need for their personal and professional development, including effective communication skills, problem-solving, decision-making, innovative thinking, teamwork building, and public speaking. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the current situation of SDL in Moroccan higher education and look for pathways for possible improvements. It specifically attempts to explore how university students manage to achieve the desired goals of their learning and education and seeks to assess the readiness of learners to take part in active learning and to reconsider their existing attitudes and assumptions to meet the expectations of their teachers. SDL is highly recommended, as it effectively motivates learners to take the initiative in their learning needs (Knowles, 1975). However, for SDL to be implemented successfully, certain challenges should be addressed to ensure better outcomes in different higher education learning settings.

Policymakers in Moroccan higher education have recently recognized the importance of SDL in higher education. This transition in learning strategies is manifested in the integration of remote language learning applications such as Rosetta Stone in Moroccan universities. This initiative is taken to encourage students and put them into self-directed learning experiences. A study has been conducted by Asrif (2024) at Moulay Ismail University to demonstrate the SDL readiness of university students through their acceptance and use of the Rosetta Stone. The findings reveal that while students demonstrate above-average SDL readiness, they do not possess the required full readiness to direct their own learning independently. This shows the need for additional support and competencies to develop effective SDL skills. Moroccan education policymakers should give priority to full SDL integration in future reforms.

Knowles (1975) investigates the main principles of SDL, emphasizing the importance of SDL in enabling learners to take the initiative and become responsible for their knowledge and progress. However, Moroccan higher education is still required to promote SDL to help graduates become independent and creative thinkers and allow them to meet the requirements of an increasingly interconnected global world.

For a better organization and articulation of the research study, the following research questions are used:

- Question 1: What are university students 'attitudes towards self-directed learning?
- Question 2: What challenges complicate the adoption and implementation of self-directed learning in higher education?

- Question 3: To what extent does self-directed learning enhance students' education in Morocco?

2. Review of literature

2.1 Defining self-directed learning

SDL has been debated and researched by educators since the mid-1900s. Different terms are used continually to refer to this learning style among adults, including self-education, andragogy, self-directed learning, autonomous learning, and lifelong learning. This approach implies that "*learning should empower a student to become a free, mature, and authentic self*" (Savin-Baden & Major 2004, p. 14).

Knowles (1975) is among the pioneers who developed the theory of andragogy or adult learning. "Andragogy" comes from combining the Greek word 'aner' (meaning "man" and 'agogus' (meaning "leader"). Andragogy is defined, therefore, as "*the art and science of helping adults (or, even better, maturing human beings) learn*" (p.19). It is different from pedagogy, which is essentially used for the teaching of children. Knowles (1975) has provided a detailed definition of this approach to learning. He states that SDL is "*a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help from others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes*" (p.18).

Educators widely recognize the definition of Knowles as it provides all the key elements of a successful SDL. Thus, it is a process that an individual has to go through to fulfill the desired learning goals. The learning process can be with or without the help and guidance of someone else. Learners become able to know, select, implement, and evaluate the outcomes of self-directed learning to make sure that the learning objectives are reached. According to Knowles (1975), learning becomes self-directed when learners manage to control the learning process, evaluate their needs, and decide on the learning content that best meets their expectations.

Brookfield (1985) points out that "*it is easy to conceive of the self-directed learner as one who pursues learning with a minimum of assistance from external sources. Indeed, individual control over learning is often claimed to be the distinctive characteristic of self-directed learning*" (p07). Learners who are autonomous in their learning and understand the concept of this kind of learning can self-analyse the steps of the self-directed learning process and make changes to enhance it since they are allowed to have control over it.

Self-directed learning is a pedagogical approach that requires learners to take responsibility for their learning and improvement. Fundamentally, the learner decides to control and fulfill self-learning objectives within a given context. The teacher and the peers are not excluded from this process. This involves continuous interaction and negotiation between the teacher and the learners involved in the learning process, its goals, activities, and assessment. Besides, self-directed learning is geared towards the development of 21st-century skills to further prepare students for future professional careers. Therefore, integrating SDL into the learning process is crucial since it allows

learners to develop essential skills that make them competent and able to have control over their lives, as shown in the following figure:

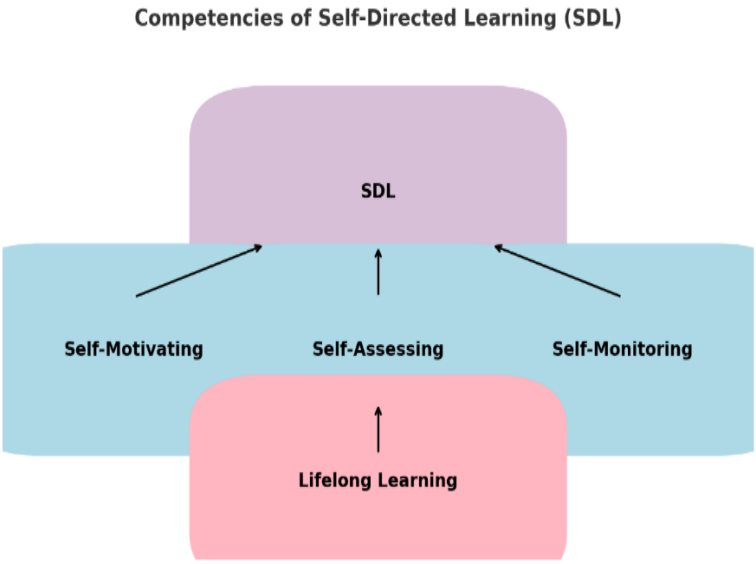

Figure 1: Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a continual process. Learners follow steps and procedures to plan, implement, and evaluate their own learning experience. Knowles (1975) points out in his theory that SDL consists of six major steps: 1. Climate setting whereby effective learning is developed through mutual support and trust between the teacher and the learner and the learner himself/herself has to trust his/her abilities. 2. Diagnosing learning needs. 3. Formulating learning goals. 4. Identifying human and material resources for learning. 5. Choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies. 6. Evaluating learning outcomes.

2.2 The goals of self-directed learning

Knowles (1975) states that "*self-directed learning assumes that learners are motivated by internal incentives, such as the need for esteem (especially self-esteem), the desire to achieve, the urge to grow, the satisfaction of accomplishment, the need to know something specific, and curiosity*." (p.21). Caffarella (2000), in turn, suggested that "*there were four goals likely to motivate learners to engage in SDL*". (Cited by Merriam. S, & Bierema. L, 2014, p.66):

1) The aspiration to gain knowledge or develop skill,
2) Become more self-directed in learning,
3) Inspire transformational learning,
4) Emancipatory learning.

The first goal shows that the main and ultimate purpose of any kind of learning is gaining knowledge, but in SDL, the objective is to gain knowledge and develop interpersonal and professional skills. The second goal assumes that learners are autonomous and know their needs well. They may be guided or assisted by their educators, but they actively negotiate, evaluate, and determine their learning. The third goal assumes that learners need to be aware of their learning procedure, reflect on their

learning experience, and examine and reconsider their existing assumptions and attitudes. The fourth goal is an extension of the second goal because it refers to autonomous learning as a way to enhance self-development.

An example illustrating the four goals is the aspiration to gain knowledge or develop skills—for example, a learner decides to study business management. S/he becomes more self-directed in learning and moves on to take a business management course, s/he becomes able to select the areas of business management that s/he needs to focus on and can watch or listen to any program about business management and broaden their knowledge about relevant key concepts. For inspiring transformational learning, the learner, in this case, may meet a successful business person whose business communication is remarkably advanced. The learner is impressed and sets objectives to develop effective business communication skills and behaviours. Finally, self-directed learning can be emancipatory, urging learner to brush up on their business communication skills and decide to enroll in advanced business communication classes in an English-speaking country. Through this experience, the learner becomes self-motivated and gets this from their own experience and learning journey. S/he also understands how to select the best learning style that helps the learner achieve the desired learning goals.

2.3 The benefits of self-directed learning

Generally speaking, the SDL process is individual, aimful, and developmental. The individual nature of SDL enables the learner to be autonomous. This quality motivates the learner to make decisions and take charge of their learning. SDL is also aimful: when learners adopt SDL, they set tangible goals and work hard to achieve them. SDL is developmental in the sense that it is a way for personal improvement and transformation. Learners develop knowledge and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Learners become able to think, understand, innovate, solve problems, and achieve goals. SDL empowers learners and gives them the freedom and autonomy to choose what, why, how, and where they learn. The journey that a learner takes to achieve their goals allows them to acquire several qualities, including self-motivation, self-management, self-monitoring, and self-modification.

2.4 Supporting self-directed learning

Teachers play a key role in the learning process. One of the most important tasks of the teacher is to raise learners' awareness of their roles in learning. The teacher has an impact on shaping self-directed learners in their class. The teacher and the learner should be aware of their roles throughout the process of learning. Teachers do not only teach and give information but fulfill key functions. "*Monitor of student learning, motivator, organizer and controller of pupil behavior, provider of accurate language models, counselor, and friend, needs analyst, materials developer, evaluator*". (Richard, 1990, p.12). The roles adopted by teachers are based on the teachers' decisions on the kind of activities, programs, and selected learning experiences. Teachers should position themselves in the learning process. Hedge (2000) states that teachers should motivate their learners to create a sense of responsibility

toward their method of learning. Thus, learners also play some roles in the success of the learning process. As mentioned before, raising the awareness of teachers' and learners' roles is necessary to shape and ensure the effective implementation of SDL.

2.5 Self-directed learning in Moroccan higher education

Moroccan higher education operates under the LMD system, including 'Licence', 'Master', and 'Doctorat' programmes organised into semesters. The higher education system includes both state-owned and private institutions and is closely linked to most European educational systems. Over the years, different reforms have been implemented, bringing about significant changes. Since independence, Moroccan higher education has undergone numerous changes, targeting different aspects, including organisational, institutional, and pedagogical approaches. These reforms emphasise not only technical skills but also the development of transferable skills that allow graduates to compete effectively in the workplace, which has increasingly become more interconnected and global.

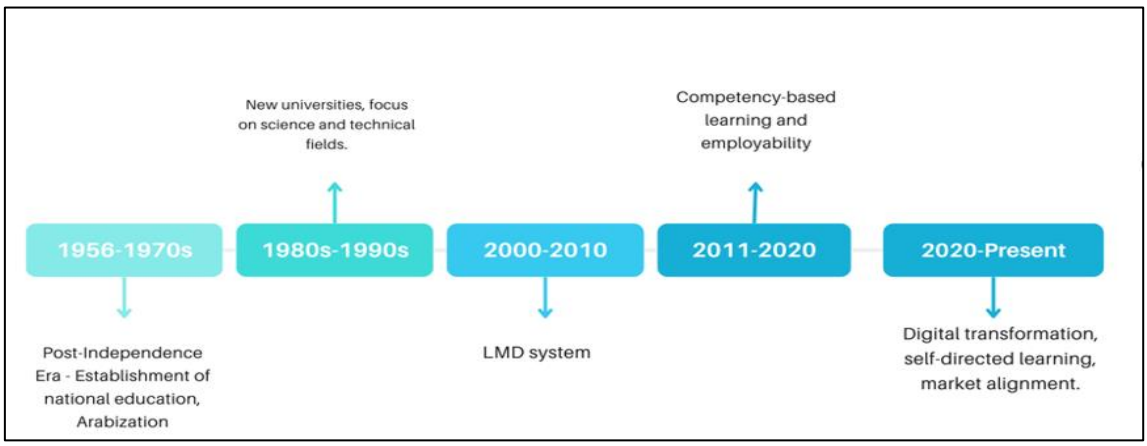

Figure 2: Higher education reforms in Morocco

The ongoing reform (The Government Strategic Vision (2015-2030) for Education and Training) aims to improve the quality of university education and the quality of learners graduating from Moroccan universities. This reform highlights the need to introduce new teaching methodologies and calls for implementing new teaching approaches such as self-directed learning as it helps learners to develop personal and professional skills. Remarkably, Moroccan universities are actively working to promote favourable environments to enhance the effective implementation of proposed learning approaches. Therefore, great efforts are made to minimize large class sizes and ensure a higher standard of quality in higher education. These initiatives reflect the commitment to providing more opportunities for more personalised learning experiences where students can engage more with the learning material, interact more with their peers, and receive the attention they need from their instructors. This tailored learning approach not only facilitates better learning outcomes but also promotes a more supportive schooling environment.

3. Methodology

A survey was used as a research tool, and 20 questions were aimed at university learners. It was conducted online via Google Forms and in person using paper-based methods. The survey format includes both close-ended and open-ended questions, encouraging participants to elaborate in detail when required to express agreement or disagreement. The research study aims to explore university students' attitudes toward self-directed learning theory and assess its potential for adoption in Moroccan universities. The sample includes 110 undergraduate students from different University Business Schools in Morocco, aged between 18 and 20. The participants are Moroccan and can speak Arabic, French and English.

4. Presentation and discussion of results

The survey aims to identify students' attitudes and perceptions of self-directed learning and examine the potential utility of this learning approach in higher education in Morocco.

4.1 Participants' demographics

The first part of the questionnaire consists of three questions that collect information about respondents' demographics, including gender composition, age range, and English language level. The research sample includes 110 participant students from different state-owned business schools who range in age from 18 to 20 (please see Table 2). Almost two-thirds of the respondents (64,2%, please see Table 1) are females, largely outnumbering males (35,8%). The sample consists of university students whose level of English ranges from intermediate to advanced.

Table 1: The Participants' Gender

Gender	Percentage
Male	35.8%
Female	64.2%

Table 2: The Participants' Age

Age	Percentage
18 years	63.9%
19 years	30.6%
20 years	5.5%
Above 20	0%

Table 3: The Participants are University Learners

Status	Percentage
Yes	100%
No	0%

4.2 Learners' attitudes towards self-directed learning

After having provided a detailed and illustrated picture of the demographic composition of the sample (age range, gender composition, education cycle, and English language level), an examination of participants' attitudes toward self-directed learning, as well as a description of the potential benefits and the challenges, is provided.

4.2.1 Preferred learning approaches: engaging vs. lecturing

The second part of the survey investigates students' attitudes toward self-directed learning (SDL), including their preferred teaching methods and the challenges they may encounter while adopting SDL.

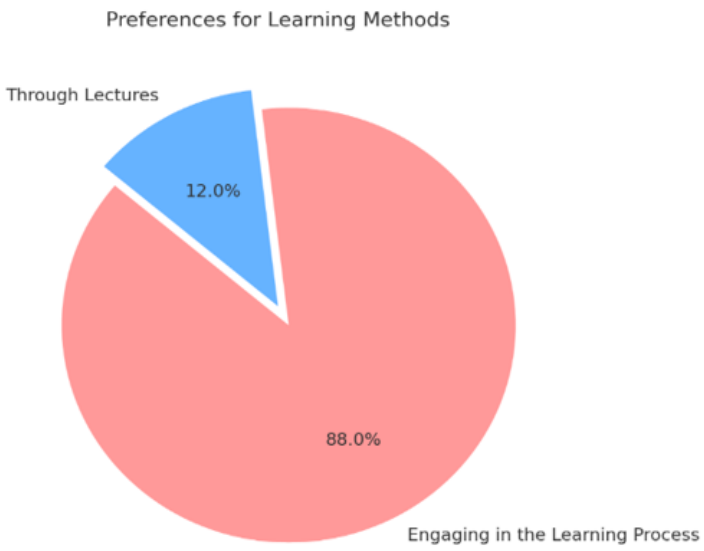

Figure 3: Preferences for learning methods

The results show an inclination towards engagement-based learning approaches. 88% of respondents reportedly believe that they learn more effectively when actively participating in the learning process. However, only 12% of participants prefer lecture-based methods. This predilection highlights a tendency toward interactive teaching methodology over traditional lecture-based methods. The outcomes align with the fundamental principles of SDL, wherein learners are expected to be responsible for their education by engaging with content and collaborating with peers and teachers. The collected data implies that Moroccan university students are open to new learning methods and are more likely to prioritize active engagement.

4.2.2 Students' attitudes toward course engagement

The data presented in Figure 3 highlights students' perspectives regarding active learning as an effective approach to enhancing course engagement.

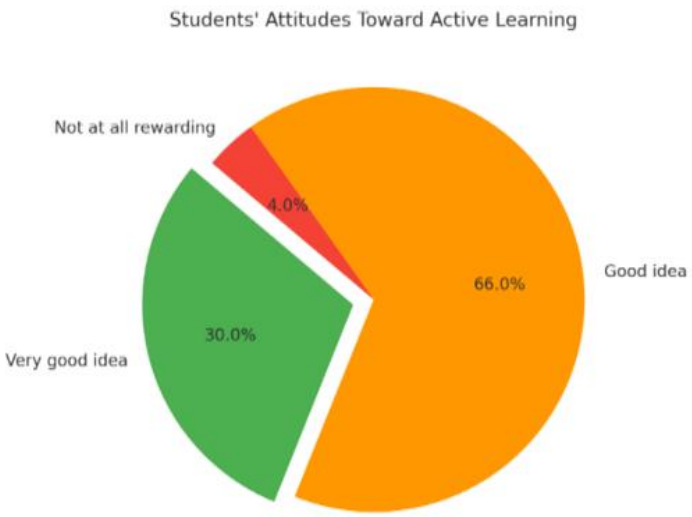

Figure 4: Students' attitudes toward active learning

Most respondents display a positive attitude toward SDL, with 30% of participants considering active learning a "very good idea" and 66% considering it a "good idea." In total, 96% of students show support for active learning, thereby recognizing the importance of SDL in fostering autonomy and building up a reliable sense of responsibility. In contrast, only a small portion (4%) of respondents find active learning "not at all rewarding." This indicates that some students might face challenges while attempting to adopt the SDL approach in the learning process. However, the positive view of most students underscores the growing recognition among students of the benefits of active learning in Moroccan universities.

4.2.3 Students' priorities: grades vs. learning approach

Figure 5 shows the students' responses regarding their priorities in the learning process. Most respondents (67.9%) prioritize grades over the adopted learning method. In contrast, 32.1% of students focus more on the adopted learning approach. This result demonstrates a significant inclination toward good grades to meet graduation requirements as the main academic objective. In contrast, some students prefer an effective and engaging learning environment. This result suggests that students can be open to the SDL approach, provided that it allows them to do well in exams. For educators, this result indicates the importance of balancing students' priorities and the SDL approach. In other words, any innovative teaching method must ensure that it fosters autonomous learning while allowing learners to improve their grades.

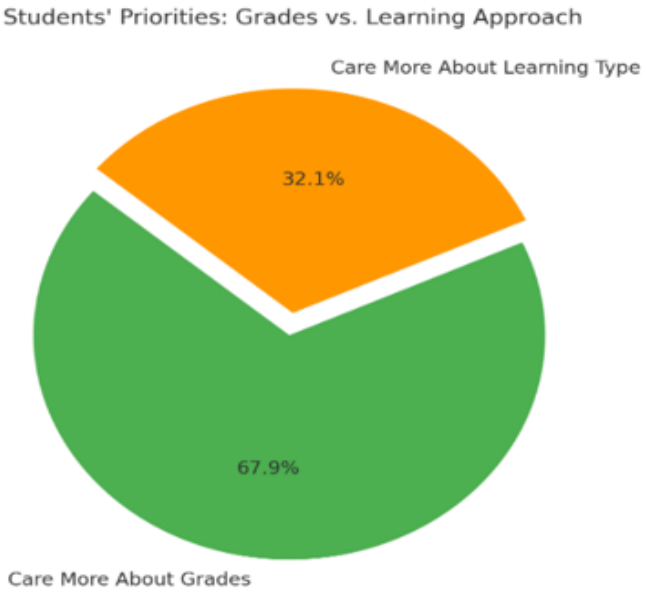

Figure 5: Students' priorities: grades vs. learning approaches

4.2.4 Teaching methods

The survey findings provide valuable insights into the teaching practices in Moroccan higher education classrooms, emphasizing the degree of students' engagement and involvement in the learning process.

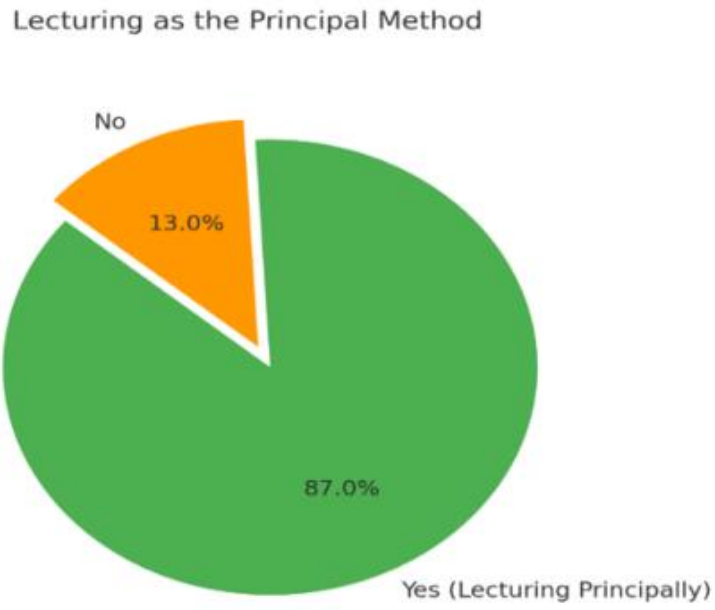

Figure 6: Teaching methods

Figure 6 demonstrates that most respondents (87%) consider lecturing as the primary teaching method used by their teachers. These findings show the dominance of the traditional teacher-centered approach in Moroccan higher education. However, 13% of respondents indicated that their teachers use varied teaching methods.

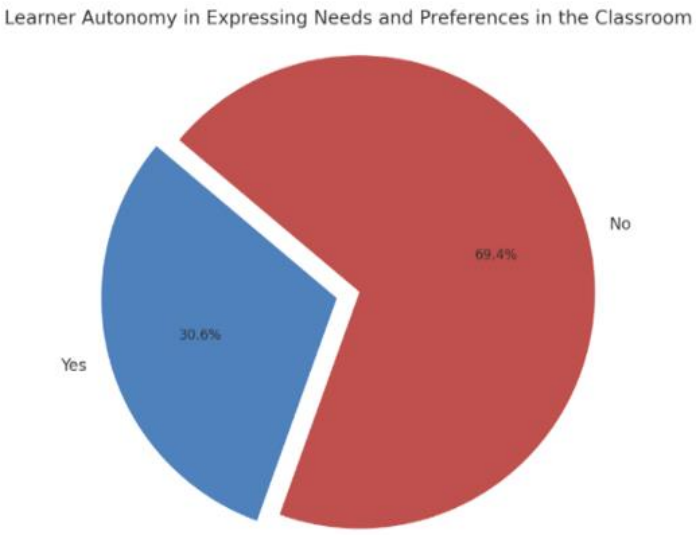

Figure 7: Learners' needs and preferences

Figure 7 draws attention to learner engagement, showing that 69.4 % of respondents recognize that their teachers do not incorporate extra activities that promote autonomous learning, such as allowing learners to select their preferred activities and tasks. A limited portion of 30.6 % of respondents imply having opportunities to express their needs and engage in activities.

4.2.5 Teacher-centered learning

As illustrated in this figure, a teacher has total control over the learning milieu. 84.4% of the respondents' state that their teachers guide their learning, demonstrating a predominantly teacher-centered approach in the classroom. Students are offered limited opportunities to take charge of the learning process, which may undermine the process of developing SDL skills. Nevertheless, 15.6% of participants acknowledge their involvement in autonomous learning activities.

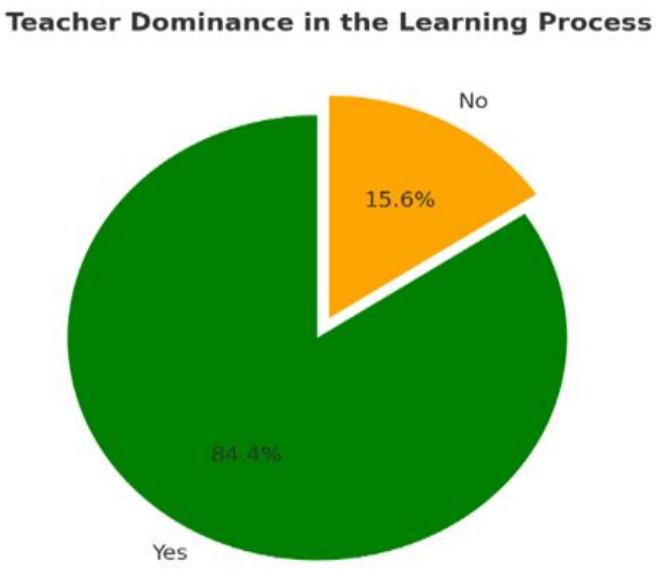

Figure 8: Teacher dominance

In light of these results, it is important to take into consideration the importance of active learning activities. Adopting SDL can create a positive educational environment where students are empowered with critical skills and a sense of responsibility while collaborating with their teachers and benefiting from their support and guidance.

4.3 Classroom activities

The bar chart titled "Frequency of Classroom Activities and Learner Engagement" illustrates that classroom activities are categorized according to their frequency and students' perceived engagement.

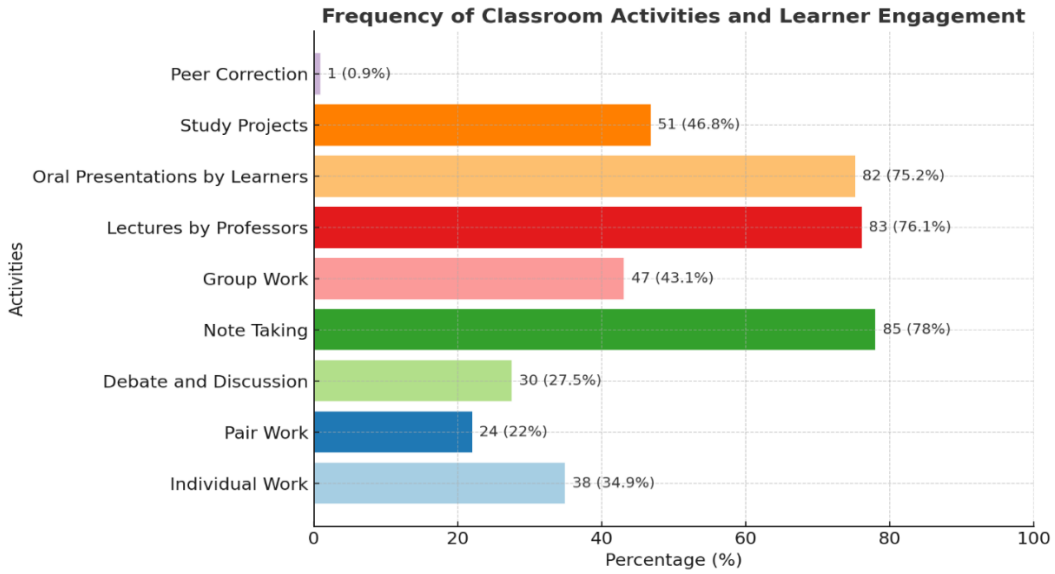

Figure 9: Classroom Activities

Note-taking, professor lectures, and oral presentations are the dominant activities in the participants' classrooms. Oral presentations are the sole active and independent learning method, highlighting the focus on traditional teaching methods. As clearly shown in the bar chart, the survey data emphasises the importance of more diverse and interactive classroom activities that support student autonomy and active participation.

The respondents claim that group work activities are useful. Group work is an opportunity to share notes and help each other. Besides, it promotes active learning because learners share different knowledge and learn from each other. Other respondents claim that the best way to learn is through debating, giving oral presentations, and engaging in classroom discussions, as they enhance communication assertive behaviors, and teamwork skills, which are some of the essential skills of the 21st century. Respondents also confirm that debating allows them to talk freely with each other. It is the most desirable way to argue, communicate their professional skills, and defend their positions. It is also an opportunity to revise, motivate, and explain complex concepts to each other. These activities increase self-confidence and enhance public speaking and presenting skills. The respondents point out that these activities also promote teambuilding skills, which are important for their future professional careers. Overall, these activities guarantee that everyone participates, communicates, shares ideas, and solves the issues discussed.

4.4 The challenges of SDL

Table 4 lists several challenges that hinder the implementation and promotion of self-directed learning (SDL). Respondents could select multiple barriers and share additional challenges based on their learning experiences.

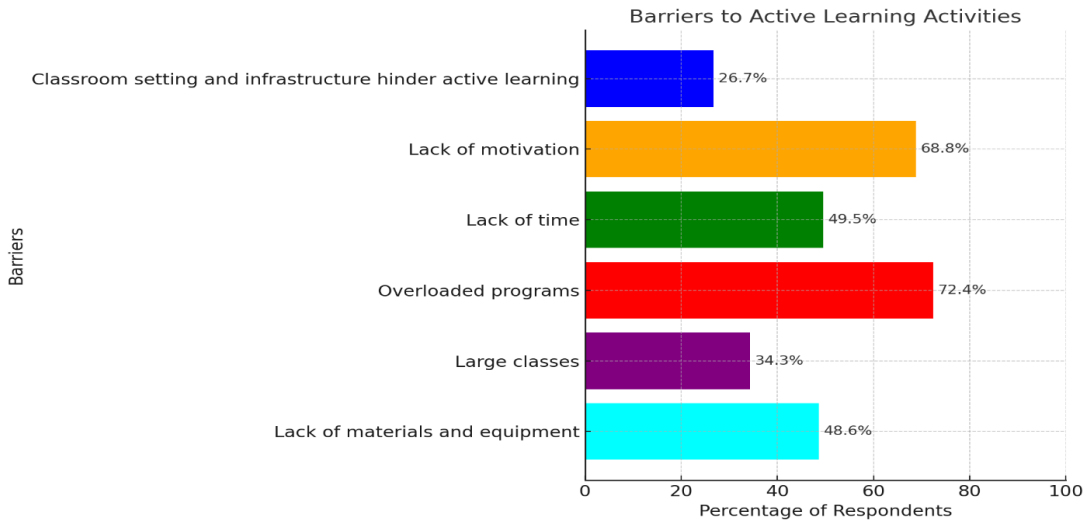

Figure 10: Barriers to SDL

A significant number of participants (72.4%) indicate that overloaded academic programs are a major obstacle that prevents teachers and students from adopting the SDL approach in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, time constraints, with 49.5% of respondents expressing their need for more classroom time to implement SDL in their

learning, often due to exam pressures and overloaded academic schedules. Demotivation is another factor hindering the adoption of SDL, with 68.8% of respondents indicating that lack of motivation affects teachers' and students' abilities to engage in SDL activities. Similarly, 48.6% of participants list the unavailability of necessary materials and equipment as a major barrier to effectively completing SDL tasks. Furthermore, 34.3% of respondents note the physical and logistical obstacles caused by crowded classrooms, while 26.7% cite cramped classroom settings as a factor limiting the implementation of extra activities. Some respondents mention a lack of interest among learners and teachers in adopting new learning methods. It is also highlighted that teachers prefer traditional teaching methods or tend to overly depend on sharing content from their computers with the help of a data show, often due to time constraints and overloaded curricula. These challenges underscore the need for a more supportive academic environment that encourages educators and students to adopt SDL strategies.

5. Conclusion

This study explores Moroccan university learners' attitudes toward self-directed learning (SDL) and its implementation and potential utility in Moroccan higher education. The findings indicate two distinct learner archetypes. The first group includes learners who advocate the SDL approach, showing their preference for different interactive methods, such as group work activities, debating, and oral presentations. The second group, however, emphasises grades over the adopted learning approach. For these students, teachers are viewed as having total control over the learning process. However, several challenges impede the implementation of SDL, including overloaded programs, time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of motivation, equipment, and materials. These constraints hinder both teachers and learners from fully adopting SDL, thereby restricting opportunities for the effective integration of SDL strategies in the teaching and learning process.

The findings of this study highlight the necessity for facilitating the integration of SDL in Moroccan higher education. SDL empowers learners and allows them to develop the required skills for more effective personal and professional development. However, educational institutions must adopt strategies that balance traditional teaching methods with active, learner-centered approaches for SDL to flourish. As guides and helpers in Moroccan higher education, teachers need support and motivation to transition from being the dominant sources of knowledge to facilitators who help and monitor students. Educational institutions must also provide structural and material support to overcome barriers such as resource limitation, overloaded curricula, and lack of motivation among teachers and students.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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