
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

High-Agency Teaching Practices: The Case of English Teachers in Moroccan Secondary Education

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| ABSTRACT

The feeling of ownership and sense of control, often referred to as learner agency that students have over their learning, has recently garnered significant attention in English language teaching. Instructional strategies that empower learners have yielded promising results with regard to student engagement and academic outcomes. This study aimed to investigate the prevalence of high-agency practices among English teachers in Moroccan secondary education. Quantitative Data was collected using a questionnaire. The sample comprised 130 Moroccan English teachers working in public schools. The findings revealed a strong inclination among the surveyed teachers towards utilizing teaching practices that support learner agency. However, certain areas, such as providing self-access opportunities and embracing uncertainty, exhibited varying frequencies among respondents. Despite these differences, the study highlighted that Moroccan English teachers are at the frontiers of pedagogical innovation. This research pinpoints specific areas for further development to enrich the cultivation of learner agency in language education.

| KEYWORDS

Learner agency, teaching practices, ELT pedagogy, secondary education, Moroccan English teachers.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In recent years, applied linguists have begun to recognize the pivotal role of learners in shaping the teaching and learning environments (Nunan, 1988; Elen, Clarebout, Léonard, & Lowyck, 2007; 2007; Neumann, 2013; Bremner, 2020). Within this context, instructional strategies aimed at fostering learner agency have garnered considerable attention owing to their profound impact on student engagement and academic outcomes (Reeve & Jang, 2022). Admittedly, English teachers have made a significant contribution to shaping the linguistic competencies and academic trajectories of learners within diverse institutional settings (Sang, 2020).

There is a paucity of scholarly works specifically examining teaching practices that promote learner agency in Moroccan secondary education. There are, however, a few studies exploring learner autonomy in some Moroccan educational contexts. It is crucial to discriminate between learner autonomy and learner agency. The latter encompasses not only the capacity for self-direction but also the active involvement, decision-making, and empowerment of students in their learning process, surpassing the traditional boundaries of learner autonomy (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021).

This study seeks to determine the degree to which English teachers in Moroccan secondary education employ high-agency practices in their instructional practices. Twelve practices have been selected based on a self-assessment questionnaire authored by Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021). The list of the teaching practices discussed in this study is by no means exhaustive and reflects

instructional strategies common to EFL teachers with a learner-centered orientation. This research is poised to contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on language education by offering actionable insights to enhance the integration of high-agency practices in English language education in Morocco.

2. Literature Review

Traditional learning theories such as mastery learning (Bloom, 1968) and information processing (Miller, 1955) regard learning as a product and focus on the outcomes of the learning process, emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge, skills, or behaviors. "With a product curriculum, curriculum processes are seen as ways of bringing order, control, and direction into language teaching and language course design" (Richards, 2017, p. 124). In this transmission-based approach, the role of the learner is reduced to that of a recipient and reproducer of an existing body of knowledge, which is transmitted by trained individuals whose main role is to follow the dictates of academically detached policy-makers with a political agenda predicated on the imposition of control and order (Van Lier, 1996).

The growing emphasis on the processes of learning has spurred a paradigm shift in the way language learning is conceptualized and operationalized. Littlewood (2011) regards the process as a fundamental component in all approaches. In a process-oriented approach, process, and product are not mutually exclusive. Littlewood (2011) posits that adopting a process-oriented approach does not indicate "a complete change in orientation but a shift of priority, based on the recognition that the process of learning is the primary factor to be considered in the classroom" (p.21). In the stronger sense, "the whole curriculum is based on a "process model" and organized around learning experiences designed by the teacher or negotiated by the students" (Littlewood, 2011, p. 22).

A few decades ago, views of the learning process were influenced by behaviorism. Within this paradigm, "the learners followed the teacher's lead, taking little initiative, responding to environmental stimuli, and developing L2 habits by overcoming L1 habits through restricted practice" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 298). Subsequently, behaviorist approaches to language learning were disputed in light of new findings in second language acquisition (SLA). The innate ability of language learners to use creative utterances upended the basic premises that behaviorist theories rested on. It was posited that an internal system is responsible for regulating the acquisition of a second language through a series of covert processes in which the L1 appears to play a lesser role. (Chomsky, 1967; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Brown, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2001).

Affect was also found to play an important role in shaping learners' second language development (Schumann, 1978). In addition to the affective realm, Lantolf and Thorne (2007) added social factors to the mix. They noted that individuals are social beings and, therefore, cannot be insulated from social influences. These theoretical insights brought about a new teaching approach in which individual differences are taken into account and in which the learner plays a much more important role; in this progressive educational ecosystem, the learner is granted freedom of choice and ownership of their learning, resulting in more responsive teaching.

The concept of learner agency can be traced back to philosophical and political worldviews, which call for the emancipation of the learner (Larsen-Freeman, 2012). Friere's (1970) revolutionary ideas have infiltrated language educators' parlors and have given rise to critical pedagogies that sought to uncover the covert structures that contribute to learners' disempowerment. Furthermore, developments in sociological research have shed light on the role of habitus in shaping individual perceptions (Bourdieu, 1991). Larsen-Freeman (2012) argues that the traditional conceptualization of language has also contributed to the maintenance of the status quo. Language is traditionally viewed as a closed system and, as a result, language learners are denied the right "to create their own patterns with meanings and uses and to expand the meaning potential of a given language, not just to internalize a ready-made system" (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 301).

To emancipate the learner from the shackles of unquestioned conformity, so to speak, a shift of attitude is needed. Language learners, after all, are cognitive, social, and political beings. Treating them as such may maximize their learning potential. Several strategies have been proposed to promote learner agency in language education. One such strategy is embracing a student-centered approach that integrates choice-based activities. Allowing students to select topics, materials, or assignments that foster a sense of ownership over their learning journey. This strategy acknowledges and respects individual student interests and learning styles, empowering them to engage more deeply with language learning materials and tasks (Dewey, 1938; Daniels, 2001).

Another crucial aspect of promoting learner agency is encouraging goal setting and self-reflection among students. Most theories of self-regulation attach critical importance to goal setting. A goal reflects one's purpose and refers to quantity, quality, or rate of performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goal setting involves establishing a standard or objective to serve as the aim of one's actions. Goals are involved across the different phases of self-regulation: forethought (setting a goal), performance control (monitoring performance), and self-reflection (checking one's goal progress and attuning strategies to ensure success (Zimmerman, 2002).

By establishing personal language learning goals and regularly reflecting on their progress, students take charge of their learning pathways. This strategy cultivates metacognition. In other words, learners exercise their free will to monitor their learning process, select the learning habits and strategies that bring about more learning, and get rid of those that hinder their learning process. Through this reflective practice, students become more adept at self-assessment and self-regulation, which are crucial skills for lifelong language learning (Oxford, 2017).

Project-based learning (PBL) is an influential strategy that supports learner agency by engaging students in authentic language tasks. In PBL, students engage in collaborative efforts, where they actively problem-solve, create, and communicate in the target language. This approach shifts the focus from passive reception of knowledge to active application, encouraging students to make decisions, take initiative, and take responsibility for their learning outcomes. By working on projects that line up with their interests or address real-world language use, students become more invested and motivated in their learning process (Boss & Larmer, 2018).

Peer teaching plays an essential role in fostering learner agency in language education. Encouraging students to teach and learn from each other not only reinforces their understanding of language concepts but also promotes a sense of responsibility toward their peers' learning. "Certain cooperative learning approaches foster a high degree of learner autonomy because they provide students with the freedom to explore their own interests and to organize activities" (McCafferty, 2006, p. 26). Collaborative activities, such as group discussions, language games, or joint projects, empower students to share ideas, negotiate meaning, and collectively construct knowledge. In this collaborative environment, students take on active roles, contributing to a dynamic learning community where agency and mutual support thrive (Baltzersen, 2023). The benefits associated with peer-learning have been corroborated by research evidence. Synthesizing over 800 meta-analyses, Hattie (2009) concluded that "The biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers" (p.22).

Integrating technology into language learning is another avenue for promoting learner agency. Using language learning apps and interactive tools has been shown to empower students to take control of their learning pace, preferences, and progress tracking. These resources often offer adaptive learning experiences, immediate feedback, and personalized pathways, providing learners with the freedom to make choices, set goals, and monitor their progress independently. Incorporating technology in language teaching provides opportunities for self-directed exploration, encouraging students to engage with language learning beyond the classroom (Richards, 2015).

The strategies outlined above are often referred to as high-agency practices. These teaching practices can help promote learner agency by integrating choice, self-reflection, collaborative activities, project-based learning, and technology. Employing these practices, English teachers can create an environment that supports students' autonomy, initiative, and active participation in their language learning journey. Recognizing and fostering learner agency not only enhances language acquisition but also equips students with valuable skills and attitudes that result in lifelong learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Aims

English language Instruction in Moroccan secondary education is greatly affected by ministerial mandates and standardized tests. It can then be hypothesized from this pedagogical arrangement that Moroccan teachers will tend to teach to the test and use teaching strategies intended to maximize the attainment of educational outcomes at the detriment of learners' long-term goals. The present study aims to test this hypothesis and investigate to what extent English teachers in Moroccan secondary education use teaching practices that promote learner agency.

3.2 Sample Selection

The sample comprised 130 participants working as English teachers in Moroccan public schools. The selection of participants was facilitated through snowball sampling. The questionnaire was emailed to a few colleagues, who then shared it through their networks.

3.3 Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study is adapted from a self-assessment tool authored by Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021). The questionnaire includes twelve high-agency teaching practices. Permission was obtained from the original author to incorporate this questionnaire into the research study.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the selected participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Participants were given a predetermined time frame to complete the survey, with reminders sent periodically to encourage participation and maximize response rates. Data collection took place over a specified period, allowing for comprehensive data acquisition from a diverse pool of teachers.

4.1 Demographic information

<i>Teaching Experience</i>	
1 – 6 years	17.4%
7 – 11 years	17.4%
12 – 16 years	18.9%
17 – 21 years	31.8%
22 + years:	22.7%

This distribution shows a relatively balanced spread of teaching experience. However, there's a significant percentage of teachers (31.8%) with 17 to 21 years of experience, indicating a higher number of seasoned teachers compared to those with less experience.

<i>Gender</i>	
Female	41%
Male	58%

There's a notable gender imbalance among English teachers in the sample, with males making up a larger percentage than females.

<i>Age</i>	
22 to 34	17.4%
35 to 44	46.2%
45 to 54	23.5%
55 – 64	9.8%
65 and over	3%

The majority of teachers fall within the 35 to 44 age group, followed by a substantial portion in the 45 to 54 age range. The percentage decreases significantly in the older age brackets.

<i>Students' age group</i>	
Children	45.5%
Teenagers	96%
Adults	72%

The surveyed teachers mostly teach teenagers (96%) and adults (72%), while a smaller percentage engage with children.

5. Results

The table represents various teaching practices intended to foster learner agency. The total number of respondents for each practice is 130 or slightly less in some cases (noted as 129 or 127). The respondents' answers are categorized into four levels: "Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," and "Often."

Teaching Practices	Respondents	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Item 1	130	0.77%	7.69%	30.00%	61.54%
Item 2	130	0.77%	3.08%	30.77%	65.38%
Item 3	130	1.54%	2.31%	16.92%	79.23%
Item 4	130	1.54%	2.31%	30.77%	65.38%
Item 5	130	1.54%	2.31%	18.46%	77.69%
Item 6	129	0.78%	6.28%	41.86%	41.08%
Item 7	130	1.54%	8.46%	33.85%	55.38%
Item 8	130	1.54%	12.31%	46.92%	39.23%
Item 9	130	0.77%	9.23%	41.54%	48.46%
Item 10	130	0.77%	7.69%	44.62%	46.92%
Item 11	130	0.77%	7.69%	44.62%	46.92%
Item 12	127	18.11%	21.26%	28.35%	20.47%

1. Partnering with students	Over 90% of respondents sometimes or often see themselves as partners in the teaching-learning ecology.
2. Cultivating inquiry	A majority (over 95%) occasionally or frequently aim to cultivate an attitude of inquiry among their students.
3. Awareness of classroom dynamics	Nearly 96% are conscious of student participation, showing a high awareness of student engagement in class activities.
4. Adapting language use	Around 96% of respondents occasionally or often teach students to adapt language to different communication situations,
5. Flexibility in lesson management	The majority (around 96%) have some level of flexibility in managing lessons.
6. Technology integration for self-directed learning	While over 82% occasionally or often use technology for student-generated content, there's still a significant portion that rarely or never does so (around 7%).
7. Encouraging lifelong learning.	Roughly 89% of teachers sometimes or often see it as their role to prepare students for challenges and opportunities beyond the classroom.
8. Providing self-access opportunities	While a significant percentage (around 86%) occasionally or often provide self-access opportunities, there's a notable proportion (around 14%) that rarely or never does so.
9. Using learner-driven feedback	Nearly 90% make use of feedback, including learner-driven feedback.
10. Openness to learning from students	A substantial majority (around 91%) are open to learning from and with their students.
11. Teaching based on student interest	Around 91% sometimes or often teach what students show interest in learning.
12. Comfort with uncertainty	About 48% of respondents are comfortable with uncertainty in activity outcomes, while a significant proportion finds it challenging.

6. Discussion

The findings from this survey highlight an overwhelmingly positive trend toward high-agency teaching practices. The twelve teaching practices in the survey received high-frequency rates indicating a tendency toward progressive approaches to English language teaching. Contrary to the traditional views of the language learner, over half of the surveyed teachers view their students as partners in the teaching-learning ecology. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role in the enactment of learner agency. For example, the computer metaphor is usually used to describe how input is processed by students. Comparing learners to computers is not a helpful heuristic and is likely to create a robotic relationship between teacher and learner, where the role of the learner is confined to the execution of the teacher's decisions (Larsen-Freeman, 2017). It is crucial, therefore, to adopt a more humanistic approach to language teaching and instill in students the belief that they all have the ability to learn and succeed (Murphy & Gash, 2020).

Another notable aspect is the concerted effort, reflected by over 95% of respondents, to cultivate an attitude of inquiry among students. By prioritizing the cultivation of curiosity and critical thinking skills, the surveyed teachers demonstrate an awareness of the importance of capitalizing on students' natural inclination to ask questions; agentive learners are life-long learners, and since language learning is a long-term endeavor and classroom instruction should therefore be directed to fostering a sense of curiosity in learners or an attitude of inquiry (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Students who are not encouraged to ask questions and compare language forms will not be able to notice salient features that often characterize real-life communication events (Schmidt, 2010). Empowering learners to question, explore, and engage critically with the subject matter is an essential component in the enactment of learner agency.

A high level of consciousness regarding student participation is evident, with nearly 96% of educators actively monitoring and encouraging engagement within class activities. Knowledge of students' strengths and weaknesses can help teachers create differentiated lessons (Tomlinson, 2017). One way to understand your learners' needs and abilities is by creating a learner profile. A learner profile is an instructional tool used to record information about a student's skills, strengths, and interests. It can also be used to highlight potential barriers to learning and make recommendations about what is needed to support learning (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Accommodating students' differences is likely to foster an inclusive and participatory classroom environment where students feel valued and encouraged to contribute, thereby enriching the overall learning experience.

The survey also underscores the significance of language adaptability, with approximately 96% of respondents focusing on teaching students how to adapt language to diverse communication contexts. Encouraging students to adapt language to different social situations indicates that teachers are well-aware of the importance of sociocultural or pragmatic competence (Savignon, 1972). Moreover, the flexibility exhibited by the majority of surveyed teachers (around 96%) in managing lessons demonstrates a commitment to adapting teaching methodologies to accommodate students' varying needs and evolving circumstances. This adaptability is crucial in creating a responsive learning environment that can better cater to the diverse learning styles and requirements of students (Kolb, 1984).

A substantial portion (over 82%) of the surveyed teachers frequently use technology to enable learners to generate their own content and direct their learning. In this regard, Otto (2017) noted that "educational models have largely shifted away from exclusively teacher-centered classrooms toward student-oriented, active and collaborative learning environments, with the student as the creator of digital texts and media and (co-)constructor of knowledge, both in and out of the classroom" (p. 19). The results are not surprising, given that over half of the surveyed study participants are millennials. It is worth noting that the way technology is leveraged makes the difference. Using digital tools in the classroom may have a limited impact on learning if students are not engaged in the selection of the content. For example, teachers can encourage students to create multimodal texts using video-editing tools (Kress, 2010).

Preparing students for challenges beyond the classroom is considered a pivotal role by around 89% of teachers, indicating a collective responsibility towards equipping learners with skills necessary for real-world scenarios. In EFL contexts, opportunities for language practice are minimal, and the need to practice outside class is not only desirable but is also necessary to build communicative competence. Teachers can help students build sustainable learning habits by inviting students to reflect on their learning strategies. Effective learning strategies can build students' confidence and set them on the path to lifelong learning. Lifelong learners are self-motivated, but many students are not. It is, therefore, necessary for language teachers to include activities that help students see the long-term gains of being agentive. Reeve et al. (2002) pointed out, in support of lifelong learning, that "Initial education is proclaimed as no longer sufficient for a rapidly changing context marked by globalizing processes and advances in information and communications technologies" (p.1).

While a significant percentage (around 86%) offer self-access opportunities, there remains a notable proportion (around 14%) that does so infrequently or never. The high frequency of this item may be ascribed to the perceived signification of self-access. Sturtridge (1992) defines self-access as the "system which makes materials available to language learners so that they can choose to work as they wish, usually without a teacher or with very limited teacher support" (p. 4). The surveyed teachers may interpret self-access as language resources available online. To manage self-access, "teachers need to relinquish some of their control over learners and learn new skills to take on their new roles" (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 13). Providing avenues for self-access empowers students to take ownership of their educational journey, and efforts should be made to encourage and expand these opportunities (Sackstein, 2015).

Substantial uptake of learner-driven feedback suggests that the surveyed teachers understand and appreciate the role of feedback in enhancing the learning experience. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACFEL) recommends that feedback be provided in multiple formats, including formative, summative, and self-assessment. The latter is particularly relevant to learner agency as it helps students monitor their progress and identify their own strengths and weaknesses and assessment

criteria (Priestley, 1982). Each form of feedback has a specific purpose or goal. These goals include checking progress, assessing student performance, and encouraging self-reflection. Maas (2017) coined learner-driven feedback (LDF), which combines and adapts various types of feedback and allows learners to determine the feedback they receive.

"In LDF, the feedback is given by the teacher, but learners decide how and on what they receive feedback: they can choose between various formats (for example, hand-written, email, audio recording) and are required to pose questions about their work to which the teacher responds" (Maas, 2017, p. 129).

A majority (around 91%) exhibit openness to learning from their students, embracing a collaborative approach to education. This receptiveness to mutual learning fosters a conducive environment where insights from students contribute to enriching the teaching-learning process. "Students deepen their learning and enact their agency through self-expression in relation to something of value to them" (Larsen-Freeman, 2021, p. 10). In addition, teachers who are willing to learn from their students often succeed in raising their students' confidence and overcoming their inhibitions, which is a key contributor to successful language learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1988). Larsen-Freeman (2021) remarks that "students need to feel safe in order to be willing to engage and cooperate in a learning community" (p.9). Perceptive teachers tend to invite students to share their interests with the rest of the class in order to foster a sense of community (Speelman, 2020). Around 91% of the surveyed teachers sometimes or often teach what students show interest in learning, indicating that students' views and feelings do count.

Despite these positive trends, a significant percentage of respondents (about 48%) expressed discomfort with uncertainty in activity outcomes. The enactment of learner agency necessitates a shift in attitude. While learning outcomes are necessary to help students focus on what is important, learner agency cannot be supported if teachers are not willing to relinquish some control over the direction of the lesson. Some educators go as far as to suggest that good teaching is a long conversation, and a good conversation is one in which the outcome is unpredictable (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). Encouraging teachers to embrace ambiguity and use it as a catalyst for the empowerment of learners could prove beneficial in promoting high-agency practices.

6. Conclusion

Contrary to what was hypothesized about English teaching practices in Morocco, the survey findings reveal an encouraging trend among English teachers in Moroccan secondary education. The overwhelming majority of the surveyed teachers embrace high-agency teaching practices. Most of the teachers view their learners as partners within the teaching-learning ecosystem. The dedication to instilling curiosity, learner-driven feedback, and student participation suggests a commitment to student-centered pedagogy. Emphasizing language adaptability, flexibility in classroom management, and a focus on lifelong learning further reinforces the commitment to high-agency teaching practices. Furthermore, the willingness of the surveyed teachers to remain open to learning from students and their collective commitment to continuous improvement is praiseworthy.

However, amidst these positive trends, certain areas necessitate attention and improvement. Limited provision of self-access opportunities and discomfort with uncertainty in activity outcomes signal areas for further exploration and development. Encouraging teachers to embrace ambiguity as a catalyst for innovative teaching strategies and expanding self-directed learning opportunities could enhance the overall learning experience. Although the data is not large enough to generalize the results, the prevalence of high-agency practices in Moroccan teaching contexts is a promising sign of a gradual transformation of the teaching landscape in Morocco, where a teaching-based pedagogy gives way to self-determined learning. In the latter paradigm, teachers treat students not as 'vessels to be filled, but as a fire to be kindled.'

This study is exploratory and focuses on identifying the prevalence of high-agency teaching practices within a limited geographical area. As such, the results may not be generalizable beyond this specific region. While the study provides insights into the prevalence of high-agency teaching practices within the area, it lacks the qualitative data necessary to fully explain the underlying reasons for these practices. Future research should aim to incorporate qualitative methods to better understand the factors influencing the adoption and implementation of these practices and to assess whether the findings can be applied to broader contexts.

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