

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EFL STUDENTS' USE OF ICT ON DEVELOPING THEIR AUTONOMY

Abstract

Learner autonomy has received its due amount of attention in the literature of foreign language teaching. The concept has come to life since the 1980s. Learner autonomy has been considered as a goal of education, which ICTs, when used appropriately, may help in fostering. As such, the present study has continued that very focus by investigating the degree of autonomy that Moulay Ismail University EFL students enjoy and the extent to which they use ICTs for their learning. In essence, the study aimed at investigating how ICT's use and learner autonomy are related. A cross-sectional quantitative design underpinned the study. A self-completion questionnaire was thus employed as an instrument to collect the data. As such, a total of 109 EFL undergraduate students took part in the study. A questionnaire was administered to the respondents to find out their level of use of ICT as well as their level of autonomy. Findings revealed that the students used ICT to a large extent, and their level of autonomy was shown to be high. It was, thus, found that their use of ICT level and autonomy were significantly related.

Key words: EFL, ICT use, learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

English language teaching and learning has gone through drastic changes in the past few decades. These changes are reflected in the theories and methodologies underlying the teaching practices. Behaviourism as a theory of learning that shaped the audio-lingual method in ELT has been subject to harsh criticisms by other approaches which reconsidered the status of the learner in the teaching-learning process. Communicative language teaching is, here, a case in point. The latter approach is believed to encourage learner autonomy. Indeed, learner autonomy has been an essential debate in language teaching and learning. A report on 'Autonomy in language teaching' written by Holec (1981) marked the real beginning of the debate (as cited in Benson, 2011). It is considered the ultimate goal of the educational programs (Grabbe, 1993, as cited in Benson, 2011); Ouakrime, 1988). As such, it has been supported that the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an important role in developing autonomy in learning English as a foreign language.

This is a contemporary demanding era. Citizens are required to be equipped with necessary skills to cope with the various requirements of the learning journey. Learners now are obliged to live in a digital era in which they have to be independent. This calls for new approaches to language teaching and learning that would encourage a life-long learner. The existing literature (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Reinders & White, 2011) shows that learners have always a desire in shaping their learning process. Moreover, studies have discussed the role of ICT usage in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Few researches, however, discussed ICTs in relation to the development of learner autonomy, which made the present study an attempt to fill this gap by investigating whether there is a relationship between EFL learners' use of ICTs and their degree of autonomy in learning English as a foreign language in the Moroccan context.

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In this respect, the present study attempts to provide potential answers to the questions about the extent to which EFL students use ICTs and their degree of autonomy. Therefore, the main purpose of the study is to investigate whether there is a relationship between learner autonomy and students' use of ICTs. It, thus, seeks to investigate the following objectives:

- a) To find out the extent to which EFL students are autonomous language learners.
- b) To explore the frequency of their use of ICTs for learning purposes.
- c) To investigate whether there is a relationship between students' use of ICTs and their degree of autonomy.

In an attempt to achieve the above stated objectives, the present study seeks to provide possible answers to the following research questions:

- a) To what extent are Moulay Ismail University EFL students autonomous?
- b) What is the frequency of these students' use of ICTs?
- c) Is there a relationship between the students' use of ICTs and their actual degree of autonomy?

Accordingly, the first two questions do not lend themselves to hypothesis testing, and, hence, the following constitutes an overall hypothesis:

- a) There is a relationship between learners' use of ICTs and their degree of autonomy.

2. Review of Literature

The discussion over the role of autonomy in education has long been discussed in the literature of EFL and ESL teaching and learning (Benson, 2011; Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 1991; Ouakrime, 1988). This tendency towards autonomy parallels the shifting winds of approaches from teacher to learner-centeredness. The latter changed the teachers' roles into those of facilitators and monitors, allowing more freedom for learners to construct their own learning (Nunan, 1988). In addition, since the integration of ICT in education took place, the learners started to become more autonomous as they have a wide range of tools at their disposal (Rodrigues, 2003) to make use of whenever and wherever they like.

2.1. Learner Autonomy

2.1.1. Definitions and dimensions

As the arena of English language teaching (ELT) has opened a new page of the concern in the past few decades, one of its main tenets and, hence, goals is to raise lifelong and autonomous learners. Clearly, the term 'learner autonomy' has received much attention. This is manifested in many books and articles wherein scholars have provided a number of definitions and descriptions of the term. The advocates of autonomy go even far to state that autonomy is a prerequisite for effective learning to take place, explaining that when developed, autonomy increases good language learners who thus will assume more responsibility (Benson, 2011). Defining the concept, Holec's (1981) notion of autonomy is deemed one of the influential and, therefore, most cited definitions in the literature of learner autonomy in language teaching and learning. He defined the term as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (as cited in Benson & Voller, 1997, p.1). According to Pichugova et al. (2016) interpretation of the definition, Holec points to the responsibility concerning determining objectives, having a choice over the content to be studied, selecting learning strategies as well as evaluating learning.

Throughout Holec's report, he never states that the 'capacity' for being an autonomous learner is inborn. He rather contends that it 'must' be developed with the help of a more knowledgeable person (Little, 1991). This goes hand in hand with the 'mediated learner' described by Vigotsky as a learner "who develops self-regulation through mediation ...

[which is] provided in the form of spoken dialogues with a more capable other, who might be a teacher, a parent, or a more advanced peer” (as cited in Oxford, 2017, p. 66). According to Moll (2014), Vygotsk’s model of mediated learning involves three stages, namely ‘social speech’ (engaging in interaction with others), ‘ego-centric speech’ (learners talking to him/herself), and ‘inner speech’ (guiding one’s own action)(as cited in Benson, 2011). The latter stage, according to Benson, is said to be largely related to learner autonomy.

Along the same line, subsequent writers and researchers have defined the term in different ways. Young (1986) provides a broad view, stating that autonomy takes place when one authors his/her own world with the absence of others’ will (as cited in Pennycook, 1997). Dickinson (1987) defines autonomy as a state where a learner is ‘completely’ responsible for the decisions taken about learning as well as for the employment of those decisions (as cited in Orakci & Gelisli, 2017), a definition shared by Little (1991). The concept, according to Ouakrime (1988), marks the shift from the focus on the problems of teaching in general to those which concern the learner himself. What follows constitutes some dimensions of the concept.

Learner autonomy is “a construct of constructs, entailing various dimensions and components” (Tassinari, 2012, p. 28). Considering the dimensions of learner autonomy embodied in Holec’s 1981 definition, he, according to Benson (2011), did not delve into the cognitive abilities which are actually essential for self-management of learning. Therefore, although the definition gave a hint about the *cognitive dimension*, explicit importance of the aforementioned dimension was not given. Another dimension that has been drawn from Little’s definition of autonomy, according to Benson, has been the *psychological dimension*. Benson, in relation to this dimension, states that the psychological dimension underlies what he calls ‘effective self-management of learning’.

2.2. Information and Communication Technology in Education

2.2.1. Definitions of ICT

The approaches to language teaching, or more precisely, English language teaching have veered towards focusing on the learner. This shift has come to life so that new horizons and more promising conditions for students’ learning journey can occur, not only on a classroom level but also on a life-long level. This, however, does not mean that the role of the teacher is dismissed; he/she is rather more of a facilitator. Given that people, or more precisely, students change generation after generation, language teaching has to adjust to these changes. In this regard, one of the solutions to adapt to this change is provided through the use of ICT, which has influenced, to a great extent, the teaching and learning process (Cornu, 2010).

In this respect, according to Blurton (1999), ICT is defined as a “diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, create, disseminate, store, and manage information” (p. 63). Similarly, Postholm (2006) considers ICT “as a tool for finding information and communicating with others” (as cited in Kerouad et.al, 2013, p. 63). These definitions may seem broad and hence include general aspects of ICT. For the scope of and, hence, the purpose of the present study, some specific tools of ICT are generally the focus of this study. These include, among others, the use of computer, smartphone, tablet and electronic dictionaries which are believed to prove useful. Moreover, internet-based aspects such as the use of websites, e-mail and electronic libraries also help learners develop their English language skills (Kenworthy, 2004). Other types would include some social networking sites such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Instagram, where, as Cheng

(2012) states, students have the opportunity to organize discussions collaboratively, exchanging their opinions and develop critical thinking (as cited in Tri & Nguyen, n.d.).

2.2.2. ICT and the accessibility of education

Undoubtedly, ICT provides tremendous opportunities for raising and enhancing the quality and accessibility of education. Indeed, according to Akinsanmi (2005) and Kumar and Pasricha (2014), ICTs help widen access to education, and they give rise to more flexibility and accessibility of education for learners so that they can have access to knowledge and information anywhere and anytime they wish. They influences the way students learn, increasing lifelong learning as well as improving education quality (Davis, 2005). In addition, Moore and Kearsley (1996) state that students with special needs will find it easy to access knowledge in the ICT driven educational programs with less constraints (as cited in El-Ayachi, 2013).

2.2.3. ICT and autonomy

Clearly, ICT has influenced education, resulting in affecting teaching and learning (Yusuf, 2005). Indeed, it, as is believed by a number of researchers (Davis & Tearle, 1999; Lemke & Coughlin, 1998, as cited in Mudasiru, 2005), has the capacity to change the way students learn. That is to say, it adds to their motivation, skills and engagement in the learning process. Similarly, Cuban (2001), Larouz & Aqachmar, (2013) and Larouz and Fatmi (2014) contend that these technologies largely promote teaching and learning. In addition, Dudeney and Hockly (2012) argue that interactive whiteboards (IWBs) have the potential to improve student learning, and they help learners be more engaged in their tasks. Traditionally, teaching favoured content over process. It was done in the form of lectures and presentations with the emphasis on the activities which enhance content learning. Now the world has changed, and, hence, the job of teaching and learning has to meet this change. In an attempt to achieve this, reforms have been made on the curriculum. That is, communicative language teaching has been adopted and has geared towards ‘how’ rather than only ‘what’ information is to be used.

In addition, in the last few decades, learner’s contributions to the learning process have been recognized. This is, according to Reinders and Hubbard (2013), a good sign for and step into the fruitful development as learning is not confined to the classroom, but it takes place outside its walls. ICT, indeed, “provides students with individual learning episodes” (Rodrigues, 2003, p. 275), although these episodes can be limited if the classroom culture does not adapt to them. Thus, technology plays a crucial role in providing tremendous support for learners to be autonomous (Beatty, 2010). The potential support that technology provides lies in its capacity to help both “learners to gain more control over the learning process, and for teachers to have more ways to connect with learners both in and outside the classroom” (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013, p. 360).

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The present study was carried out in in the department of English studies at the University of Moulay Ismail. The purpose was to investigate undergraduate EFL student’s degree of use of ICT and the latter’s relationship with their level of autonomy.

3.2. Participants

A sample of 109 Moulay Ismail University, School of Arts and Humanities, EFL students participated in the study. They are 49 female and 60 male students with the age ranging from 20 to 29 years old up. These participants completed fully all the items, leaving

no room for missing data, which is undesirable. The type of the sampling strategy was a non-random convenience sampling.

3.3. Procedure

The study at hands employed a questionnaire to collect data about EFL students' use of ICTs and their degree of autonomy in learning English as a foreign language. There are many reasons behind the employment of such an instrument over other methods. These include the opportunity to administer the questionnaire to a large sample of respondents from different locations. It also saves time, cost and energy; the very important tenets to be considered when doing research. Another very important benefit, unlike the case with other types of instruments, lies in its assurance of anonymity. Also, as Munn and Drever (1990) argue, respondents are more likely to be honest when they are left to answer alone or anonymously (as cited in Kerouad, 2019).

In essence, the questionnaire consisted of three main parts. The first part was devoted to the collection of data on what Dornyei (2010) calls 'factual questions' aiming at gathering information about some demographic characteristics, namely, for the present study, gender and age of the informants concerned. The second part, 'entitled learner autonomy', contained 14 items in the form of statements. The scale was adopted from Orakci and Gelisli's (2017) scale. Finally, the third part is about students' use of ICT, which included 15 statement items was adopted from Missoum's (2016) scale. These two researchers gave their full consent to the researcher of the present study to use the scales for and only for research purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The following table illustrates the number and the corresponding percentage of male and female students.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of students' gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	60	55%
Female	49	45%
Total	109	100%

As it is shown in the above table, the distribution of gender was not that balanced with male informants representing 55% and female respondents representing 45%. What follows is a table demonstrating the age groups of the participants in terms of frequency along with its corresponding percentage:

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the age groups

Age groups	Frequency	Percent
20-23	65	59,6%
24-28	38	34,9%
29-up	6	5,5%
Total	109	100%

The table above shows that the dominant age group varies between 20 and 24 years old with a percentage of 59,6%. The second group occupies its due space too, comprising 34%. The last group is shown to be the lowest frequent one, consisting only of 5,5% participants.

The following figures are designed as a summary of the two variables in question. In other words, the continuum of the degrees of agreement and disagreement has been summarised into three categories as is going to be shown.

4.2. Research Question One: what is the degree of EFL students' autonomy in learning?

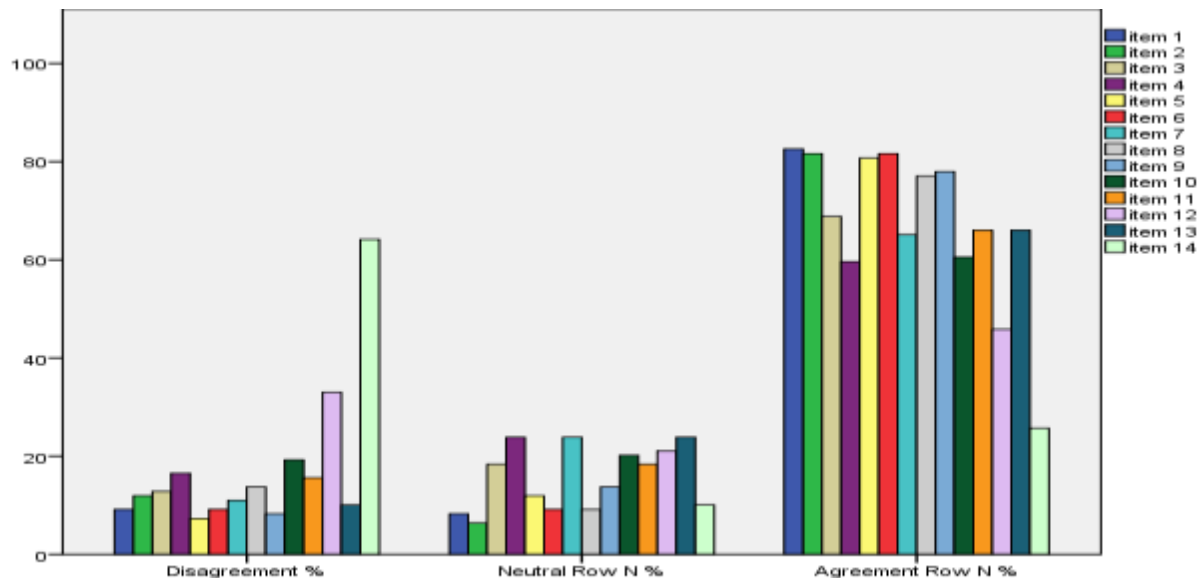


Figure 1

The degree of learner autonomy in terms of Disagreement, neutrality, and agreement

Overall, the respondents showed some degree of autonomy to an extent. The figure above was created to summarize the results obtained for the five categories. Thus, they were reduced to three categories so that the overall picture of the degree to which students are autonomous is drawn. Indeed, as is shown in the figure above, the participants have shown an agreement rate which is higher than disagreement. It can be seen that items 1 “I can set learning goals for me”, 2 “I can learn with and from others (e.g. fellow learners, teachers)”, 6 “I can select and use different materials and resources to study English at home”, 5 “I can identify my strengths and weaknesses while learning English”, 9 “I can motivate myself (in a way relevant to me) for my learning”, and 8 “I encourage myself to speak in a foreign language, even though I am afraid to speak or make mistakes” received higher rates of agreement response. The percentages for these items are: 82,6%, 81,7%, 81,7%, 80,7%, 78%, and 77,1%, respectively.

However, the responses correspond the ‘disagreement’ response yielded very low rates. An exception here is in the item number 14 “I do not try to improve my weaknesses”. Obviously, this is a negatively worded item, contradicting with the concept in question. It is thus reverse coded. Accordingly, 64,2% disagreed with the item, meaning that this number of the respondents actually try to improve their weaknesses. Evaluating one’s progress in learning English receives the rate of disagreement which reaches 33%.

For the neutrality response, the rate was not high. Items 4 “I can use effective time management for learning”, 7 “I know the Websites and online resources that are useful for my learning”, and 13 “I would like to have a say in the choice of learning activities” all share the same number of students who remained neutral with a percentage of 23,9% for each of the aforementioned items.

4.3. Research Question Two: To what extent do EFL students use ICTs in learning English as a foreign language?

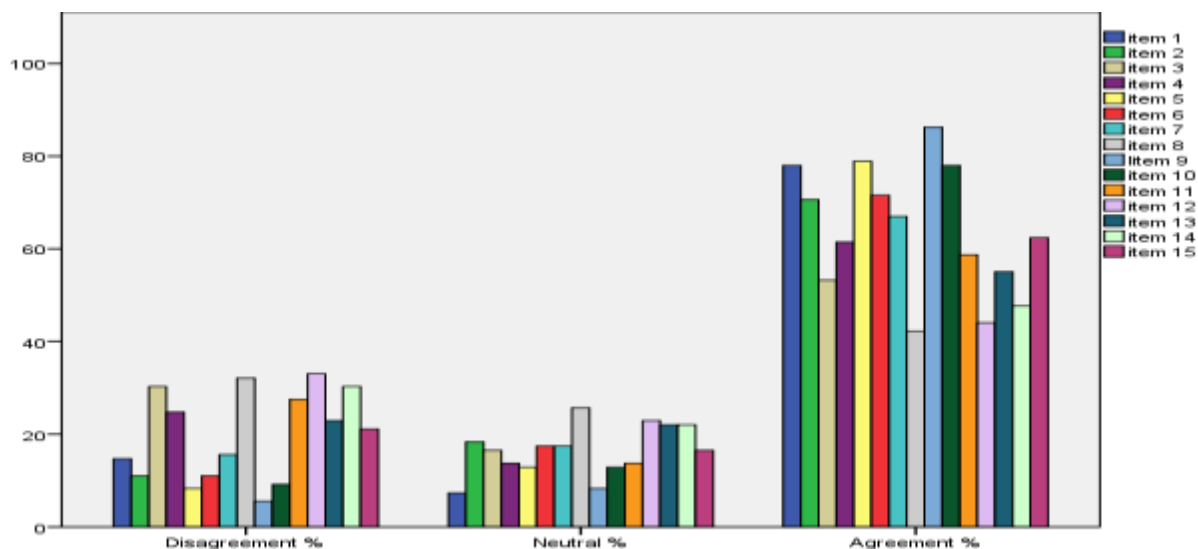


Figure 2

The degree of ICT's use in terms of disagreement, neutrality, and agreement

As the figure clearly displays, the respondents showed a degree of use of ICTs that is high to an extent. Item 9 “I watch videos (from YouTube, etc) explaining concepts / knowledge related to my studies” was the highest rated item concerning the agreement response, with a percentage of 86,2%. This is followed by other higher degrees of use of ICTs displayed in items 5 “I search for information / documents I need on the Web”, 1 “I use the Internet to connect with other learners for learning”, 10 “I look up new words in electronic dictionaries”, 6 “I chat with other students about learning assignments, etc”, and 2 “I download books/ lessons and read them”, the percentages of which were 78,9%, 78%, 78%, 71,6%, and 70,6%, respectively.

4.4. Research Question Three: Is there a relationship between Students' degree of autonomy and their degree of use of ICTs?

To test whether learner autonomy and use of ICTs are associated, the data was submitted to Chi square test (test of independence). This statistical procedure runs as follows:

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	36,851 ^a	16	,002
Likelihood Ratio	27,888	16	,033
Linear-by-Linear Association	12,301	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	109		

a. 20 cells (80,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.

Based on the table of the chi square test (X^2) above, the level of significance is 0,002, which is a value that is less than 0, 05. That is to say, there is a statistically significant relationship between learner autonomy and students' use of ICTs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis is rejected, and, hence, learner autonomy and students' use of ICTs are associated. So far, the results are displayed in tables and figures along with their corresponding descriptions. The following section will be concerned with a brief discussion of the findings obtained above.

Based on the findings found above, the tendency is more directed towards setting goals (82,6%). This may indicate that these EFL students have clear objectives and goals to achieve in learning English. Goal setting is also found to be the most valued aspect of autonomy by Vietnamese students (Tin, 2012). This is followed by another aspect of autonomy which concerns the ability to learn from others. That is to say, 81,7% opted for agreement with the aforementioned characteristic of autonomy. This ability and, thus, behaviour of learning from others may be enhanced by such networking sites such as Facebook and instant messaging as is already stated in the literature review.

Moreover, these EFL students seem to have self-esteem. In other words, the affective aspect of autonomy is dealt with. This is apparent in 77,1% of the students who state that they encourage themselves to speak English even when afraid to make mistakes. This percentage was really expected especially at the university level. This self-confidence may positively affect and, hence, enhance their participation in class, which in turn may result in fostering the process of learning, especially the speaking skill. This self-confidence is probably enhanced thanks to their use of ICTs. In this regard, as is already stated in the literature, the internet and other types of media sources empower learners by equipping them with tools to take the advantage of and hence opportunities for using English are increased.

For ICT's use, the tendency is directed more towards YouTube videos explaining concepts related to their learning with a percentage of (86,2%). This may be due to its popularity among the university students. In addition, 78% of the respondents use the internet. Almost the same number was found in a study by Kerouad and Fagroud (2013), in which 70% of the respondents were reported to use the internet. The respondents also opted for agreement concerning the use of electronic dictionaries with a percentage of 78%. This percentage indicates that the participants opt for such electronically based dictionaries more than the printed ones. In fact, based on a personal ad hoc observation, EFL students are more inclined to such dictionaries than the printed type. This is because electronic dictionaries are easier to use than the printed ones. This high degree of ICT use is a result of the common positive attitudes of students towards it.

5. Conclusion

The present study concludes that the students are autonomous language learners. Drawn also from the findings is the extent to which these students use ICTs for their learning, which is high. That is to say, the higher the level of ICTs' use of the students, the higher the degree of their autonomy is reported. Thus, it was revealed that the use of ICTs and learner autonomy were significantly related. In more concrete words, the vast majority of the students showed a high rate of use of internet-based ICTs to engage in self-studying, which resulted in increasing their autonomy. Therefore, it is concluded that, based on the findings, the hypothesis that undergraduate EFL students' use of ICT and their level of autonomy are significantly related is confirmed.

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Appendix

Dear participant,

This questionnaire is an attempt to gather information needed for the accomplishment of a research project at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Morocco. I would be grateful if you could respond to the following statements about your degree of autonomy and the extent to which you use ICTs regarding your studies. There is no right or wrong answer. The information you provide here will be used in full confidentiality for research purposes only. Please be as honest as possible. Your input is very important and greatly appreciated.

Section 1: Background Information

Please put a \surd inside the appropriate box about you.

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: 20-24 25-28 29-up

Section 2: Learner Autonomy in English language learning

Please, put a circle on the box that best describes your degree of autonomy.

order	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I can set learning goals for me.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I can learn with and from others (eg. fellow learners, teachers).	1	2	3	4	5
3	I can see what prevents me from completing a task.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I can use effective time management for learning.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I can identify my strengths and weaknesses while learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I can select and use different materials and resources to study English at home.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I know the Websites and online resources that are useful for my learning.	1	2	3	4	5

8	I encourage myself to speak in a foreign language, even though I am afraid to speak or make mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I can motivate myself (in a way relevant to me) for my learning.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I know the method and strategy which suits me best and use it.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I can determine my own learning needs.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I can evaluate my progress in English by myself.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I would like to have a say in the choice of activities.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I do not try to improve my weaknesses.	1	2	3	4	5

Section 3: Students Use of ICTs for English language learning

Please, put a circle on the box that best describes your degree of your use of technology.

order	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I use the Internet to connect with other learners for learning via computer/mobile phone.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I download books/ lessons and read them.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I use computer/mobile phone to write my homework / papers.	1	2	3	4	5
4	While writing on the computer/mobile phone, I use automatic error detection (grammar and spelling check) to correct language mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I search for / find information / documents I need on the Web.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I chat with other students about learning assignments, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I practice English using websites.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I do exercises assigned and not assigned by my teachers from the Web.	1	2	3	4	5

9	I watch videos (from YouTube, etc.) explaining concepts /knowledge related to my studies.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I look up new words in electronic dictionaries.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I record lessons / lectures and listen to them (for revision).	1	2	3	4	5
12	I ask for feedback / advice by email from my teachers and supervisors.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I do quizzes and tests from the Web for practice.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I record myself (audio or video) to find out what I need to improve in my English speaking / presentation skills.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I use text messaging (SMS) to stay informed about my classes, exams, etc.	1	2	3	4	5