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Learner Autonomy in the Moroccan Baccalaureate Classroom: Instructors' and Students' attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Autonomous learning as a concept has been around since the early 1960s. Several studies have been carried out to establish its relevance, practicability, and efficacy in the EFL course. However, its use in circumstances other than those in which it first emerged has provoked passionate discussion. While some applied linguists say that learner autonomy is insufficient outside of its native environment as a culturally restricted feature, others feel it is a humanistic attribute that can be employed in any situation. Local instructors' perspectives are not an exception in the Moroccan EFL context. Some teachers feel that educating students to accept autonomy will have a positive impact. Others, on the other hand, dismiss its significance due to administrative constraints and cultural differences. The purpose of this study is to learn more about Moroccan TEFLRS' thoughts on student autonomy and how it is used in the local classroom. The study also shows how students think about learner autonomy and provides some suggestions for practicing it in the classroom.

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of language instruction is marked by repeated shifts in methodology. The desire to seek improved procedures and tactics for boosting the learner's language acquisition standards and qualifying the teaching environment is the trigger that iteratively lurks in the background of such a situation. In fact, the major goal of implementing a unique teaching model is to increase educational quality and assist students in enhancing their capacity to acquire and apply theoretical information. Since formal education has become one of the most important ways to prepare people for the job market, if not the only way, researchers have been looking for a way to teach that encourages long-term knowledge acquisition as well as permanent self-teaching and learning skills (Perrott, 2014).

In this regard, Holec launched the European Modern Languages Project in 1971, and the notion of autonomy first surfaced in language learning (EMLP) as a practical framework that can be implemented in a structured teaching-learning

environment. According to Onozawa (2014), "the notion of learner autonomy first appeared in language learning with the formation of the Centre de Recherche et d'Applications en Langue (CRAL), which focused on adult education." Since then, each institution that seeks to differentiate itself in terms of service quality has employed learner autonomy as its framing concept for its syllabus design. On the other hand, the dynamics of reflecting on the origins of autonomy in education invite thinking about it from sources other than those offered by modern literature.

Autonomy and self-education have existed throughout history in a variety of cultures and civilizations. Far before the 1970s, Ibn Sahnoon, who lived from 777–855, provided an overview of how educational practice should be carried out to be effective and more rewarding. In his book Adab el Moua'llimin (The Good Manners of Teachers), IbnSahnoon outlined clear guidelines for controlling school life and classroom management, including rewards and punishments, learning progression, holidays, the relationship between

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the school and families and the community, and—most significantly—the importance of placing the learner at the center of the pedagogical operation. According to Ibn Sahnoon, a qualified teacher is one who can stimulate a student's interest in the subject matter without employing undue pressure or force (Ibn Sahnoun's Manual, added to Ahwani, 1975). This suggests that learner satisfaction and the capacity to learn as a result of responsibility and desire are not novel concepts. Ibn Sahnoun stressed responsibility and respect for authority as good ways to teach, which was different from the most common method of teaching at the time, which was fully teacher-oriented.

The first formal debates on autonomous learning in the Moroccan EFL community took place in 2002, when the competency-based approach was adopted as the guiding idea for English instruction in the country's schools. According to the suggestions of the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2007), CBA is being implemented in Moroccan schools since it is challenging to incorporate learner autonomy into the curriculum and tie classroom knowledge real-world circumstances. Slavin emphasizes the need to encourage students to use classroom knowledge in practical settings, which is reflected in this approach. According to Slavin, if a student can pass a language test but cannot write an appropriate letter to a friend or potential employer, or if they can pass a maths exam but cannot understand the sales tax, then their education is incomplete. Allford and Pachler (2007) admit that the competency-based approach is the best model for the classroom because it gives students more freedom while still letting the teacher do his or her administrative.

Autonomous learning and the cultural construct

AL has gained prominence as a teaching tool, and there are several hypotheses about how it relates to culture. According to Baru et al. (2020), the link between the AL practice and the EFL endeavour is particularly noteworthy considering that the AL paradigm has been predominantly endorsed by western applied linguists.

As it turns out, however, the literature on the topic of AL and culture has been analyzed from a number of perspectives. The first point of view is purely theoretical and pays little attention to the necessity for actual research to assess learner autonomy in contexts other than where it first emerged. It is thought to be difficult to apply the

concept outside of its original context for a number of sociological and political reasons (Almusharraf, 2021). The effectiveness of a learner-autonomy approach may be affected by a number of factors, including the student's background, the culture of their school, and the school's emphasis on individual growth and development (Benson & Voller, 2014).

To conclude that studying learner autonomy in a particular educational environment is pointless, as suggested by the theoretical backdrop, may be seen as speculative and impressionistic. Although it is true that educational approaches are reflections of a country's larger education policy and that each country has a unique system based on its sociocultural traits and political choices, learner autonomy as a concept is worth researching. Its highly regarded value as an approach that promotes lifelong learning and aspires to a more advanced educational structure makes it a worthy subject of reflection within the area of pedagogy (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003).

The second perspective looks at the norms and practices of various communities, such as the classroom or school environment, to better understand human behavior. Self-access centers, where students study on their own time and at their own pace, have been linked to the concept of learner autonomy (Benson & Voller 2014). Learner autonomy may be difficult to achieve in a hierarchical classroom when students are expected to blindly follow the teacher's lead and take the official recommendations as fixed rules. In order to foster and promote learner autonomy beyond any contentious pedagogical atmosphere where dos and don'ts dominate the scene, it is crucial to center attention on the connections among students, faculty, and organizations.

The third perspective views the learner as someone who is completely independent in terms of what and how they take in knowledge. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy is less of a fixed paradigm that has to be pushed or embraced and more of a matter of individual taste within a given social context. It is preferable not to force students to adopt a learning model that is not engaging for them (Coons& Sugarman, 1978). The method's primary focus should be on the learner's active participation. Students who are teacher-focused and who are at ease being obedient to the teacher's presence exist everywhere, even in the European environment where the idea originated.

Students who are not willing to adopt the learner autonomy system will continue to exist, unable to function in off-teacher-mode, regardless of how well they are trained to work on their own. (Little,Ridley,&Ushioda, 2002).

Without a doubt, learner autonomy and culture are intertwined. The personal element stands out as a critical factor that might enhance or restrict the paradigm's usability and accessibility. The social setting and the interaction with the schooling environment, however, are equally important since they regularly affect the social well-being of the person and, by extension, their choice of the learning mode that better fits their educational needs. As a matter of fact, Learner Autonomy Across Cultures as a topic should put into consideration these three factors as intervening details in shaping the vision of learner autonomy and its practice in the classroom (Turula, 2017).

Several reasons have been advanced in favour of fostering autonomy in language learners, independent of their cultural setting, social background, or any personal considerations. The first is that autonomy is a human right that societies have to adhere to for democracy purposes (Benson, 2000); the second is that autonomous learning is more effective than its predecessor teaching modes that are basically teacher-centered and pay less attention to developing life-long learning strategies (Naiman et al., 1978; Macaro, 1997); and the third is that learners are more motivated to study when they feel autonomous and completely accountable for their learning away from the fully teacherdependent aspect of instruction giving (Naiman et al., 1994);

II. METHOD

The study design reflects the exploratory nature of the investigation. To answer the study's research questions, the qualitative exploratory research approach was used. Exploratory research is a kind of study that looks at areas that have not yet been thoroughly examined (Swedberg,2020). A qualitative component is often used in exploratory research. It is also known as interpretative research or grounded theory due to its adaptability and openness (Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori & Hadidi Tamjid, 2020). The following are the research questions that are being addressed:

- What is EFL practitioners' attitude towards learner autonomy in the local context?
- · How do Moroccan learners view working

- autonomously?
- How can autonomous learning be implemented in the local context?

To answer the questions above some sub-questions were used as guideposts:

- How do Moroccan EFL practitioners see and value learner autonomy in their work environment?
- How Autonomous are Moroccan students in the view of their teachers?
- How effective is the official textbook in promoting learner autonomy?
- To what extent does project work as an important section in the official textbook promote learner autonomy?
- What attitude do Moroccan students hold about working autonomously?
- How well-advanced is Moroccan students' use of metacognitive techniques in their school work, namely goal-setting, task-scheduling, and self-evaluation?
- What activities do Moroccan students engage in to supplement their learning?

Research site and participants

non-probability This sampling option attracted my attention since it includes a sample from a population I am already familiar with. Participants in the research were all full-time teachers. They were my first pick because of their qualifications as teachers with extensive experience teaching students with high levels of linguistic competency and independence. The research was conducted at the Kenitra Directorate in Morocco. A meeting with the local educational councillor was also organized, in addition to the questionnaire I forwarded to teachers and learners. The existence of a series of questions aimed at demonstrating the degree of student autonomy in the Moroccan EFL environment and the interview with the local councillor aimed at defining learner autonomy and evaluating its significance in the local community. I selected the local pedagogical councillor because I needed more facts to back up my findings and because he's an expert on the EFL project in the local community.

Procedure of collecting data

I distributed a questionnaire to Moroccan teachers to learn how they felt about learner autonomy and how it could be implemented in their various communities. The questionnaire is divided

into three parts. The first section focuses on the teachers' perspectives as well as how their students see learner autonomy and whether they prefer it to the traditional teacher-centered mode.

The purpose of the second portion is to establish if instructors adopt any autonomy-enhancing strategies or behaviors. The purpose of the third part is to examine how learner autonomy may be used in the Moroccan setting. It is worth mentioning that six other instructors participated in the questionnaire distribution. The questionnaire was delivered to 200 instructors in the Kenitra directorate; there were 120 participants, accounting for 60% of the total.

The local educational councillor who volunteered for our study kindly agreed to be interviewed. It was critical to have an understanding of his opinions on learner autonomy and the extent of autonomous learning implemented in local high schools. The problem's intricacy demands the adoption of many techniques. According to Benson (2011), researchers should include as many perspectives as feasible, with the condition that "no" one position should be considered as contradictory to any other.

Learners in the kenitra directorate were surveyed regarding their definition of autonomous learning. The purpose of this questionnaire was to determine how Moroccan students perceive and execute learner autonomy. There were a total of twenty open-ended and closed-ended questions on the questionnaire. The purpose of my closed-ended questions was to make it easier to grade and evaluate my students' answers, while the purpose of my open-ended questions was to get them to build on what they had already said. Indeed, the survey was divided into two sections.

The first section is divided into three parts, each of which has three topics. The first issue examines students' enthusiasm for language study and their perspectives on their engagement in it. The second section gathers data on how students apply meta-cognitive methods in their academic work, mainly goal setting, time scheduling, and self-assessment. Regarding the third subject, I was interested in whether or not students practice English outside of class and what activities they use to supplement their education in a teacher-free environment. The questionnaire was piloted in November 2020 to determine its validity and ease of completion by students. I delivered the form to a group of seven individuals for completion and

feedback in Mohamed V high school in Kenitra. As a result, none of the students found it difficult to complete the survey. In addition, students were given the questionnaire to complete in their classes to reduce duplicate replies and increase the proportion of viable research. With the help of six colleagues, I distributed 130 copies, and 80 copies were returned, for a participation rate of 61.53 percent. Learners must certainly be at the forefront of the development of autonomous learning. Regardless of how hard a teacher tries to instill these ideals in their students, their efforts may be futile. The student's profile has to bear the characteristics of dedication and readiness to follow directions (Yasmin et al. (2020), Blin (2005), Svalberg (2012), Balçikanli(2010), Reswari & Kalimanzili (2021).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the academic year 2020–21, teachers and students in the Kenitra area completed a questionnaire. The pedagogical councillor was also interviewed in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the autonomous learning situation in the local environment as mentioned earlier. The results show that autonomous learning as a pedagogical framework needs further consideration before it can be successfully applied in the local EFL environment. No matter if their students are capable of working autonomously, the vast majority of teacher informants believe that autonomous learning is necessary for a successful teaching course. On the other hand, students see learner autonomy as a potentially risky endeavour that might jeopardise their end-of-term test performance. Typically, they are happy with the way they are treated as teacher-oriented. The local supervisor believes that the issue is one of individual initiative since there are severe administrative restrictions that can prevent its implementation. Teachers must finish administrative tasks on time and are under the obligation to prepare students to be successful test-takers, which prevents them from offering extracurricular activities that encourage students to study autonomously. The fact that students are not always and solely responsible for learner autonomy is an unquestionable conclusion. Such a paradigm is an educational exercise that calls for teamwork. Teachers, local supervisors, and the educational authorities must all do their part to get the local EFL environment involved in a curriculum that encourages autonomous learning.

As previously stated, a three-part questionnaire

was sent to 200 Kenitra district teachers in order to investigate professionals' views on learner autonomy. The turn over included 120 informants, accounting for 60% of the total. As previously stated, the questionnaire's goal is to understand how instructors see autonomous learning in the classroom. According to the findings, 90% of respondents believe that autonomous learning is required for effective classroom practice, while 10% believe that it is secondary to their teaching philosophy because administrative duties such as preparing students to be successful exam takers take precedence over life-long learners. The questionnaire also seeks to assess baccalaureate students' independence from their lecturers' viewpoints. Only 28% of teachers believe their students have a substantial influence on their education. About 20% of baccalaureate students are average, but 52% of instructors say that the idea is not well understood and is rarely thought of by students, at least in their classrooms.

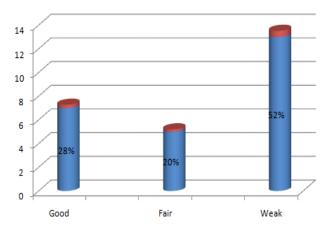


Figure 1. Students Level of autonomy according to teachers

Teachers were asked to judge how effective their textbooks are at promoting learner autonomy. 60% of instructors consider student autonomy as the capacity of the learner to participate in self-teaching techniques outside of the classroom environment. While the remainder of the informants had mixed feelings about the notion in their local context, where their concentration is largely on training students to be effective test takers. 52 percent feel that textbooks, in whatever format, will never enable student autonomy. Only 48% regarded it as a complement to education that might help students study independently, provided the teacher could "adapt" the subject matter to activities that students like to do on their own.

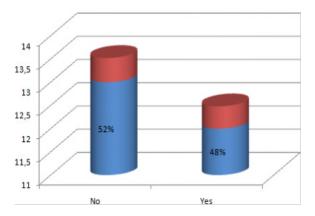


Figure 2. Does ELT textbook serve learner autonomy

Teachers were asked whether project work fosters student autonomy. Project work is the most popular activity in the baccalaureate curriculum that is, according to MEN (2007), thought to explicitly encourage students to work independently; hence, it was chosen for this study. Project work may aid students in developing independence, according to 40% of respondents. They consider it to be the sole component of the curriculum that encourages students to work independently and creatively outside of the classroom. According to 60% of respondents, autonomous learning cannot be achieved solely through project work because most students simply copy answers from the internet without making an effort. Because of this, teachers can't be sure that giving students projects will help them learn on their own without constant teacher oversight.

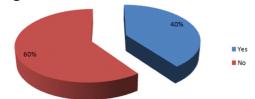


Figure 3. Learner autonomy and project work according to teachers

According to students' conceptions of their learning responsibilities, 63.75 percent feel that the teacher is crucial to their education and that they cannot study without the support of an instructor. 3.75 percent feel that being brilliant necessitates achieving independence. The remaining 32.5 percent feel that teachers and students should both be held accountable. Informants who feel they are incapable of learning on their own argue that they must be present for the instructor to educate them; on the other hand, they must pay attention and follow instructions. They are unable to discard a learning strategy that they have used since preschool.

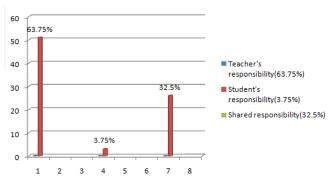


Figure 4. Responsibility in learning English in the classroom according to students

questionnaire examined how often students applied metacognitive approaches such as establishing learning objectives, self-reflecting on their achievements, and task-scheduling. Among the many strategies outlined in Oxford's (1991), I chose these because they are more likely to be relevant in the Moroccan context, where the teacher's administrative obligations impact how they instruct. The majority of students (66 percent) do not believe they are capable of defining learning objectives, allocating time for activities, or assessing their own success, according to the comments. Almost the same number (70%) say they are unable to devote time to classroom activities. Only 15% of students reported self-evaluating their learning progress in class. Such results show the Moroccan students' strong attachment to traditional teaching methods as well as their overwhelming self-distrust in their capacity to be responsible for their own learning. The following charts illustrate the statistical results:

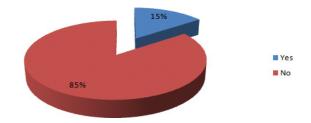


Figure 5. Students attitude towards self-assessment

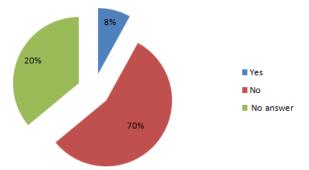


Figure 6. Students' attitude towards setting goals

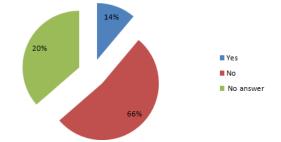


Figure 7. Students' attitude towards task scheduling

Throughout my inquiry, I sought to improve the validity and reliability of my results so that I could get a better understanding of the state of learner autonomy in Moroccan schools. Because of his well-established standing as a professional TEFLer with ongoing engagement in teaching as an observer, I felt bound to interview the pedagogical counsellor. He might be a reliable source for a more detailed picture of the issue. His observations of how much students engage in learning activities, as well as his understanding of the many challenges that high school instructors face, may provide him with a clear perspective that aids in the formation of appropriate judgments and conclusions. The pedagogical councillor's view on learner autonomy and its importance as a pedagogical concept is in line with published guidelines (MEN, 2007) that affirm autonomous learning as a desired framework worth addressing in TEFL.

It is the most effective approach for engaging students in lifelong learning and preparing them to succeed in university-level academic courses. In practice, however, autonomous learning is seldom prioritized. Most teachers avoid assigning activities that require independent study to their students. According to the pedagogical counselor, this is mostly due to instructors' unwillingness to take certain risks in introducing new tactics into their teaching pattern. When asked what method is most common in most of the courses he watches, he says that the teacher-on model is most common, even though his suggestions are different.

The educational counselor also emphasized the need to increase students' autonomy throughout their high school years. He is continually offering new methodological applications to educators in order to replace obsolete techniques in language training. Some teachers are open to new ideas, but most teachers are counter his directives. They have more faith in the traditional teaching mode.

In terms of extracurricular activities used by students to improve their independent studies, 50% feel that internet websites are the best resources for

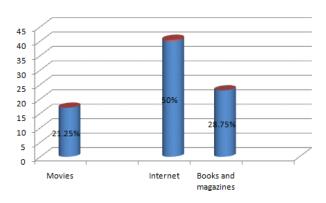


Figure 8. Sources of learning language out of school

enhancing their language ability. While 28,75% say that reading books and periodicals is an important factor in enhancing language abilities outside of the classroom, just 21,25% believe that viewing English movies helps them achieve better results.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this research, four recommendations can be introduced.:

Explicit teaching of learner Autonomy

Learners, teachers, book designers, and pedagogical counselors must all contribute to the development of autonomy in Moroccan classrooms. In reality, the whole educational system has to be rethought in order for students to completely fulfill their autonomous potential and instructors to commit enough time to learner training. Exam scores will always take precedence over quality learning and education if the focus is on preparing students to be successful exam takers.

Students should be encouraged to focus on their personal growth rather than their academic results. This notion is supported by (Borg & Alshumaimeri 2019). The learner will be less engaged in the process of self-development and autonomous learning the more he or she focuses on test preparation. The curriculum must be updated to integrate self-directed learning methodologies and approaches. This is required to structurally and practically incorporate the concept of autonomy into the Moroccan educational system. A separate learner training session on a different subject may be scheduled to allow adequate time to thoroughly understand the concept of learner autonomy. Skager and Dave (2014) and Dogancay-Aktuna (2006) say more about how important it is for the curriculum to help learners become more independent.

Enhancing autonomy in preservice-training

The first alternative emphasizes the teacher's

role in fostering self-directed learning. According to the survey, most instructors have a hazy understanding of the idea of learner autonomy and rely on traditional teaching methods to satisfy their legal requirements. The primary reason for this is because the instructor's forthright demeanor is congruent with Moroccan EFL culture, which prioritizes exam preparation and syllabus completion. Furthermore, they feel their pre-service training fell short of boosting learner autonomy and giving opportunities to exercise it via clearer practical methods focused on learner training and autonomy-referring activities to teach the various language skills.

Most people think that teacher training is a vital aspect of providing students greater independence, but instructors must also work on themselves. Indeed, educational authorities should stress the need to develop an autonomous culture in preservice education. Trainee instructors must be fully trained on how to effectively use student autonomy in their classrooms. There is an urgent need to reform the official curriculum to integrate student autonomy concepts and practices, as well as to provide instructors with significant freedom for experimentation. Because the curriculum is such an essential component of Moroccan education, the method that teachers should take must be reconsidered, as must the instructors' motivation to apply innovative teaching strategies. The teacher's motivation is very important for making the classroom a nice place to study, which will definitely make the students more productive.

Affording motivational learning atmoshere and using persuasive communication.

The learner's motivation to participate in the teaching process is closely related to excellent learning performance. In order to carry out their instructional tasks, teachers must establish a pleasant atmosphere, regardless of administrative or technological constraints. If a student lacks motivation, no amount of educational effort will be beneficial. Before assigning any incentive activities to pupils, the teacher should lead by example and make sure the classroom climate is not too stressful. Students will feel better about themselves as a consequence, and they will be more motivated to learn.

To encourage active learning, teachers should put a heavy focus on changing students' attitudes and notions about autonomous learning. According to the questionnaire and the interview,

instructors believe that students do not sense their participation in the learning process even when the instructor is there. Persuasive communication, in my opinion, may aid in the resolution of such a problem. Interacting with students allows teachers to impact their thoughts. Persuasive communication is defined by Thanasoulas (2000) as discourse that delivers facts and arguments with the goal of changing a person's implicit or explicit attitudes toward a certain topic, activity, or circumstance. This is especially true when the matter is deemed urgent. The study's results show that Moroccan students have trouble working independently because they are afraid of tests and don't know what the benefits of learner autonomy are.

Proper use of project work and explicit teaching of LLS

As previously indicated, project work has indisputable significance as an educational activity that encourages individual learning. Nonetheless, the study's findings show that teachers frequently misuse project work to achieve their goals. Project work is often used as a follow-up activity to motivate students to work outside of class. As a consequence, instructors are unaware of the aim of project work, which is to encourage instructor-student interactions while working and to fuel students' desire to learn how to do research. According to questionnaires, the majority of instructors do not assist their students as they work on project assignments. When the instructor serves as a guide, helper, and even a participant in the student's work, the goal of learner autonomy is better met. Learners may be responsible for selecting resources and setting objectives, but they may not be competent to lead their work. Projectbased learning would work as planned if teachers kept a close eye on it and made sure it was done right.

The instructor takes on a softer position as an observer, guide, and advisor. It seems that producing a successful project work requires the student to be able to self-evaluate and provide feedback on his or her own performance. Such a practice is a significant

step toward a novel view of the contemporary language classroom, in which the student assumes part of the teacher's responsibilities. The value of the instructor's presence, on the other hand, cannot be overlooked.

Notably, the competency based approach (CBA) places a high priority on the capacity to promote learner autonomy via LLS training. The roles of teachers and students need to change, claims Tomlinson (2014), in order to foster a more learner-centered learning environment and to advance the idea of the teacher as a helper and mentor. The authoritative instructor presence that is so common in Moroccan language classes has to be replaced with softer tutorial positions in order to promote students' engagement in an autonomous learning environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

Learner autonomy's popularity in EFL has garnered significant attention to the topic in the field of education in general and language instruction in particular. It is often considered that promoting it would help to raise educational standards. Lifelong learning is the most sought-after goal for modern educators due to the many benefits it is supposed to provide for the teaching and learning process. Education autonomy has become the most appealing way to support the idea that learning should continue after teaching stops.

The study's results illustrate how much work has to be done before complete student autonomy can be adopted in Morocco. Despite their grasp of the value of learner autonomy in boosting teaching quality, Moroccan teachers think they are constrained by official teaching rules that stress preparing students for final tests. Finding a way to effectively aid students in test preparation while still encouraging them to study independently stands out as a significant topic to solve. Some suggestions have been made in this article, but there is still room for more creative ideas to help students learn how to self-instruct when teachers aren't around.

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