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Turning Students in Agents: EFL University Students' Perceptions on Incorporating the SDGs into the Curriculum and the Teaching Practices of Professors

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing the quality of education has been an important concern for many stakeholders and practitioners. Moving from a teacher-centered approach into a student-centered approach has changed the role of the students into active participants in the educational process. However, a new century requires a new role. That's why, the current study investigates EFL university students' perceptions on how the incorporation of the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) into the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors can change their roles from students into agents. Embracing a mixed-methods approach, this study uses a questionnaire with open and close-ended questions to gather the necessary data. The results show that the majority of the students have positive perceptions towards how the integration of the SDGs into the curriculum and teaching practices of teachers can turn them from students into agents. Finally, this study highlights a number of recommendations that can enable appropriate incorporation of the SDGs.

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Since its independence and until the present day, Morocco has embarked on a journey of educational reforms by implementing several plans and strategies to enhance and improve schools, universities and the whole educational system. This priority of improving education is manifested in the different royal speeches which emphasized its importance in the overall development of the country. For instance, the King Mohammed VI asserted in his speech of the Throne in 2009 that "The significant reform of the education and training system is the key to the route to be taken to meet the challenges of development… [and] … to meet it, we have no alternative but to promote research and innovation, and to guarantee the improvement of our human resources, our main asset" (as cited in Liorent-Bedmar, 2014, p.97). This awareness of the vitality of human resources is manifested in the recent educational reforms which aim at equipping the students with soft skills, foreign languages, and critical thinking so that their skills match the needs of the labor market. Changing the status of students from learners into agents could be one of the aspects that can corroborate and consolidate these reforms, especially through reconciling the curricula and teaching practices with the United Nations' Sustainable Developmental Goals.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the copious literature written on the development and enhancement of the Moroccan university and on the role of the SDGs in education, there remains a gap in the literature about the importance of turning university students into agents through the SDGs. To contribute to these reforms undertaken by the ministry and to elaborate more on this gap in knowledge, this study would investigate EFL university students' perceptions on turning learners into agents through the incorporation of the SDGs into the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors.

The Significance of the Study

This study would provide more insights about students' perceptions on learner agency at higher education, which would account for the gap in knowledge about that issue. Second, the significance of this study is also manifested in its contribution to consolidating the current reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education by highlighting students' perceptions on turning learners into agents through the incorporation of the SDGs into the curriculum the teaching practices of professors. Furthermore, by addressing this issue, the current study can open up the horizon for future research about learner agency at university and its contribution to enhancing higher education.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate EFL university students' perceptions on turning learners into agents through the incorporation of the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors. This goal would be achieved through the following objectives:

1. This study would investigate EFL university students' perceptions on the notion of learner agency.

2. This study would highlight to what extent EFL university students believe that incorporating the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors can turn them into agents.

3. The study would shed light on some of the challenges that students think that university teachers can encounter while incorporating the SDGs in the teaching practices of professors.

Questions

The main questions that this study ties to answer are:

-What are EFL university students' perceptions on the notion of learner agency?

-To what extent do EFL university students believe that incorporating the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors can turn them into agents?

-What challenges do students think that university teachers can encounter while incorporating the SDGs in the teaching practices of professors?

Hypotheses

The main hypotheses of this study are:

-EFL university students have positive perceptions towards learner agency.

-EFL university students believe that incorporating the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of professors can turn them into agents.

-EFL university students may identify challenges such as time constraints and training as some of the obstacles that professors can face when integrating the SDGs into their teaching practices.

Literature Review

Developing the quality of education has been one of the priorities of the Moroccan state since its independence. From 1956 till the present day, the Moroccan educational

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system has known the implementation of more than 30 reforms aiming at developing education. Nevertheless, these attempts did not result in satisfying results since some of the major issues such as crowdedness and the mismatch between what is taught and the demands of the labor market still exist. However, the recent reforms undertaken by the government have started to take different measures to reconcile the curricula with the demands of the economic sector. That is why, an emphasis on mastering foreign languages, soft and computer skills starts to take place concretely in these recent reforms, especially at tertiary education whose aims, roles and objectives are recently redefined through the ESRI Pact 2030.

The ministry tries to foster six values, through that pact, which are transparency, ethics, excellence, equality of opportunities, resilience and openness; and to focus on four main pillars which are academic excellence, scientific research, governmental and operational excellence and innovation (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, n.d.) This pact draws on the principles defined by the New Model of Development (Ibn Tofail University, 2022) so that the reforms match the prospective demands of the country and its developmental path. Some of the areas that the ministry tries to emphasize are 1) equipping students with soft skills, 2) equipping students with foreign languages, and 3) fostering their spirit of innovation and research.

It cannot be denied that the appropriate implementation of these reforms can result in positive outcomes. Nevertheless, these reforms are, to some extent, only pedagogical in nature in the sense they focus, at the first level, on the courses and what is to be taught. This shows that the role of the student as an active member and participant in the change is somehow ignored or neglected. However, this might be accounted for by harnessing education with the Sustainable Developmental Goals. That is to say, incorporating these SDGs in the curriculum and teaching practices of university professors may raise students' awareness about them and help change their roles and the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by others. The Sustainable Developmental Goals are 17 goals that were set by the United Nations in 2015 and that are desired to be achieved by 2030 and they are categorized into environmental, social and economic goals (El Alaoui et al., 2024).

As it is known, Morocco has embraced a policy which can help it integrate in and become a player in the international scene. Therefore, considering these SDGs as transformational actions which can sustain in the development of the country, the kingdom subscribed to these goals, and a National Commission on Sustainable Development were created (HCP, 2020). Since then, the integration of these goals in different sectors has been advocated. The educational sector is no exception, since it is "closely linked to all the sustainable development goals" (El Alaoui et al. 2024, p.11). Different educational reform plans and curricula-based reforms tried to include the SDGs, but for most of the time in an implicit way (Legrouri & Sendide, n.d.), in the content of the textbooks and some courses.

The integration of Sustainable Developmental Goals in education can be called Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which is deemed to be an important element by the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development (SD) according to Harikrishnan et al., (2022). Hamwy et al. (2023) elaborate on this by emphasizing the major role that ESD plays "in achieving the SDGs outlined by the [UN]" (p.4). Education for Sustainable Development is defined by the UNESCO (as cited in Hamwy et al., 2023) as a process that helps students act and think sustainably about their present and the future of the coming generations. In a similar vein, El Karfa (2019) states that ESD is "the critical relationship between the educational systems and sustainable development" (p.400). This shows that ESD focuses on the interconnectedness of education with matters or issues of local, regional and/or global significance (Hamwy at al., 2023). That is to say, students move to a state where they start to think and act globally and sustainably, which can hone their skills and competencies.

Morocco has also embarked on this journey of education for sustainable development through the integration of the SDGs in high school, higher education, and even in the educational and pedagogical materials (Legrouri & Sendide, n.d.). The integration of the SDGs in education can be done in two dimensions or ways as Downess (n.d., as cited in El Karfa, 2019) explains. The first one is a curriculum-based dimension which centers on incorporating the SDGs into the curriculum while the second dimension is related to equipping and empowering human resources with the necessary skills, training, competencies and knowledge that can help them operate in a sustainable way. The latter dimension correlates with the importance given by His Majesty Mohammed VI to leveraging and valorizing human resources (see the introduction).

Despite the fact that the Moroccan policy of education for sustainable development "places a great deal of emphasis on upgrading human resources within and through the education sector" (El Karfa, 2019, p.397),

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there remain some weaknesses. One of these is that the development of human resources is usually perceived in terms of what they can do and know and not who they think they are and what their role(s) is. Furthermore, the SDGs are introduced implicitly for most of the time which does not "explain the broad concept of SD and its importance for the country" (Legrouri & Sendide, n.d., p.51); and this is one of the issues that may hinder and impede the effective implementation of the SGDs and ESD. In addition, these reforms are not effective unless they focus on and target citizens (NCLMSD as cited in El Karfa, 2019). This is consolidated by the findings achieved by Fahmi (2022) in her study of Citizenship Education in Morocco. She concluded that "it[citizenship education] does not encourage learners to become agents of social change equipped with enquiring minds and participatory skills" (p.209). Therefore, they may have the theory and necessary knowledge, but they may not know how to use it since they believe that their role is just to gain and have knowledge. Freire (1972, as cited in Stuart, 2020, para. 4) supports this by stating that "it [is] not enough for people to study the world [i.e. to have knowledge], they also [have the] responsibility to act…". This highlights the necessity of redefining who the student is and what his/her role(s) is.

One of the possible reconsiderations is changing the role of students from that of being acquirers of knowledge, skills and competencies into that of being agents and change makers. That is to say, students should perceive and be perceived as agents who have certain goals and purposes which do not only correlate with their academic excellence, but that go beyond that. This notion brings to the fore the concept of learner agency which is of paramount importance, according to Popoff (n.d.), in helping "students with uncertainty and ambiguity" (p.1). O'Rourke and Addison (2017) elaborate on this idea by arguing that students should embrace the role of active agents in their learning process. Through learner agency, the role of the university and the impact of the current reforms can be more effective since the students, as Popoff (n.d.) argues, would "leave school with a sense of purpose" (p.9) and would understand that their roles are bigger than just acquiring knowledge; and this is one of the aspects that constitute a 21st century student.

Despite of its significance, this issue has not been tackled in the Moroccan literature which leaves a gap in knowledge which, if targeted, can give momentum to the current reforms and redefine the role of the university. Therefore, the present paper aims to explore EFL university students' perceptions on how the incorporation of the SDGs into the curriculum and into the teaching practices of professors can change their role from that of learners into that of agents.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Based on the discussion above, this research adopted a quantitative approach by utilizing a structured questionnaire to systematically gather data on EFL university students' perceptions on how the incorporation of the SGDs in the curriculum and teaching practices of their professors can turn them from learners or students into agents. By employing a mixed methods approach, the study aims to capture measurable insights into the extent of students' awareness and engagement with SDGs, as well as how this can turn them into agents. Furthermore, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence that can inform policy recommendations and educational interventions aimed at fostering sustainable development awareness and action among university students.

Research Setting, Participants, and Sampling

The study takes place within the English Department at the University of Sultan Moulay Slimane, focusing on EFL students' perceptions about how the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the curriculum and teaching practices can change them into agents. By conducting the research within this department, the study can directly investigate how SDGs are incorporated into English language education and explore the perceptions of students about that.

The participants of the study consist of 47 students enrolled in the English Department at the University of Sultan Moulay Slimane. To get the necessary sampling for this study, the snowball technique is used. According to Oregon State University, "Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential [participants]" (2010, para. 1). Following this process, initial participants are recruited and then asked to refer to other potential participants. The intention behind using this method is particularly because it is difficult to access the population of interest, especially in the period of conducting this research because students are in the process of studying for their exams. Students within the English Department form a cohesive network, making snowball sampling an efficient approach to reaching a diverse range of participants. By involving students from various academic levels and backgrounds, the study can capture a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions regarding the integration of SDGs into the curriculum and the teaching practices of their professors.

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Data Collection Instrument

In order to investigate the research questions and provide satisfactory answers, a questionnaire is regarded as suitable tool to gather the necessary data for analysis. The questionnaire is believed to be an effective tool to collect and investigate people's opinions about something due its structured nature which can help the researchers get the exact piece of data they are interested in (Zakki, 2017). That's why, since the current study is interested in investigating the respondents' opinion (the dependent variable), the questionnaire instrument is opted for. That latter is divided into four parts with each one focusing on a certain aspect.

The first part is used to gather the demographic information of the respondents, especially their gender, age, and academic level. The second part is devoted to gathering information about the first research question i.e. students' perceptions or ideas on the notion of learner agency. The third part delves more deeply into investigating whether students think or believe that the incorporation of the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of the professors can turn them into agents or not. Last but not least, the fourth section deals with the last question and is used to determine some of the challenges that students think that professors can face while incorporating the SDGs into their teaching practices. Since the study relies on a mixed-methods approach, a set of close-ended and open-ended questions is used. The questionnaire is created through Google Forms so that it can be well-designed and flexible for the respondents.

Procedures

As stated above, the study uses snowball sampling. Therefore, after designing the questionnaire, the researchers shared the online questionnaire with the respondents to whom they have access. These respondents are asked then to fill in the questionnaire and share it with their friends and classmates. A short description is added to the questionnaire to make the respondents aware of the purpose of the study and to declare the confidentiality of their responses. After gathering the necessary data, Descriptive analysis was conducted to answer the research questions and to test whether the hypotheses (see the introduction) are confirmed or rejected. Finally, the percentages and frequencies are presented in graphs and charts to facilitate their readability.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results obtained from the questionnaire. In addition, it provides a brief analysis of the main results. The section is divided into four main parts: the first one presents the demographic information of the respondents, especially their gender, age group, and academic level. The second part is about students' perceptions or ideas on the notion of learner agency. The third part delves more deeply into investigating whether students think or believe that the incorporation of the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of the professors can turn them into agents or not. The last part reveals the challenges that students think that professors can face while incorporating the SDGs into their teaching practices.

Demographic information

In this study, 47 respondents filled in the questionnaire. 59.6% (28 participants) are females, and 40.4 % (19 participants) are males. Concerning their age, the majority of them (44.7 %) are between 23 and 27, while 38.3 % are between 18 and 22. The rest of the participants are between 28 and above 33. Regarding the academic level, 57.8% (26) are undergraduate students. Master's students represent 35.6% (16) of the respondents. Lastly, PhD students constitute a small proportion with only three participants (6.7%).

Students' Perceptions about Learner Agency

Figure 1.

How important do you think learner agency is in your academic success?

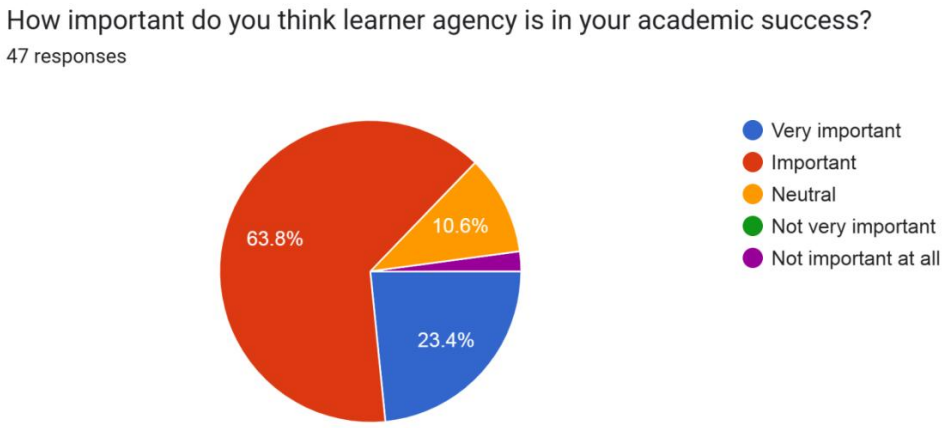


Figure2.

To what extent do you feel empowered to make decisions about your learning?

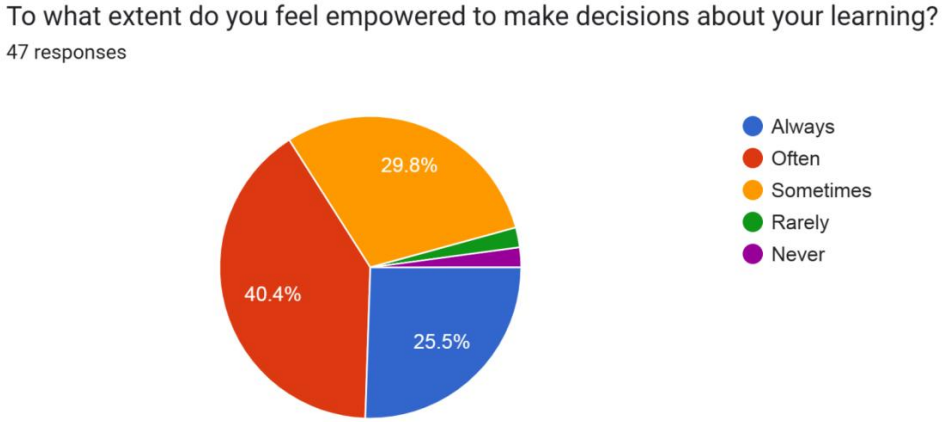


Figure 3.

How frequently do you take the initiative in your own learning process?



Respondents' answers show that the majority (63.8%) considers learner agency is important for academic success. In a similar vein, 23.4% regard it as very important while 10.6% are neutral about how learner agency can contribute to academic success and only 1 respondent believes that learner agency is not important

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at all. This explains why the majority of the participants (40.4%) feel often empowered to make decisions about their own learning and 25.5% always feel empowered to do so, while 29.8% manifest that they sometimes feel empowered to make decisions about their learning. Resonating with the first two questions, the third question reveals that 70.2% (often and always joint together) frequently take the initiative in their own learning process while only o 4.3%% (2 participants) show that they rarely take initiative in their learning process. This shows that the positive perceptions that the participants have about learner agency are reflected in the way they approach the learning process and in their higher level of readiness to be autonomous and responsible for their learning.

This part tackles the first question of the research (see the introduction). It can be noticed that students have positive perceptions about learner agency since the majority of them believe in the major role that learner agency can play in academic success and in turning them into agents who take initiatives in their learning. Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed. This can explain why Popoff (n.d.) and Freire (1972 as cited in Stuart, 2020) emphasize purposeful learning that revolves around not only gaining knowledge, but also about acting.

Students' perceptions on the incorporation of the SDGs in the curriculum and the teaching practices of the professors

Figure 4.

Are you acquainted with the United Nations' Sustainable Developmental Goals?

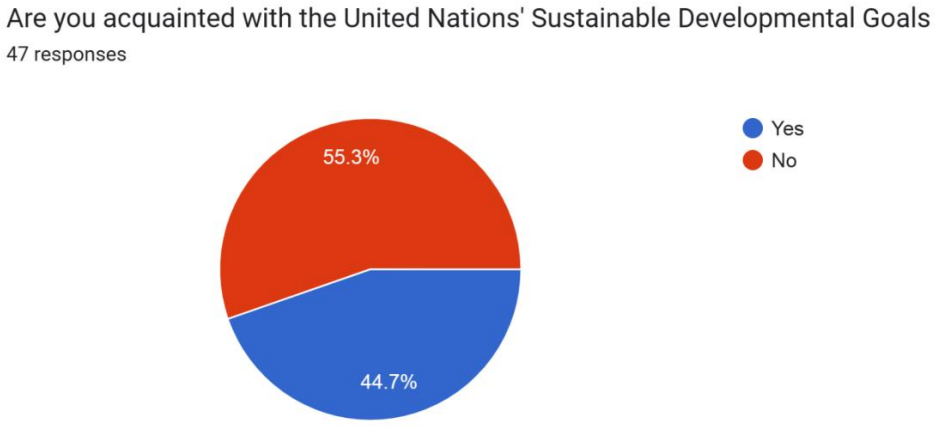


Figure 5.

Do you believe that integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the curriculum can help you become an active agent of change?

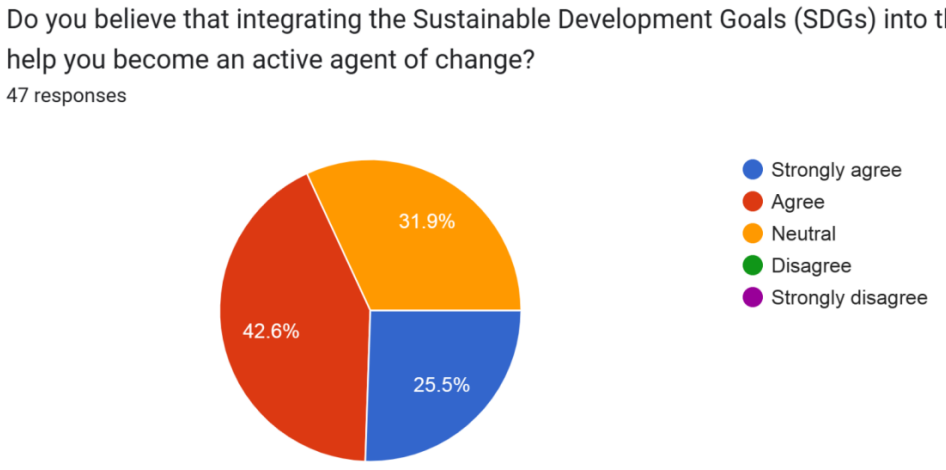


Figure 4. shows that 55.3% of the participants are not acquainted with the United Nations' Sustainable Developmental Goal, but 44.7% reported being acquainted with the SDGs. In spite of the fact that the majority are not well acquainted with the SDGs, 68.1% believe or strongly believe that integrating the SDGs can help them become active agents of change. Furthermore, none of the participants show their disagreement with the major role that the SGDs, if integrated into the curriculum, can play in turning students into agents.

Figure 6.

How effective do you think your professors are at incorporating SDGs into their teaching practices?

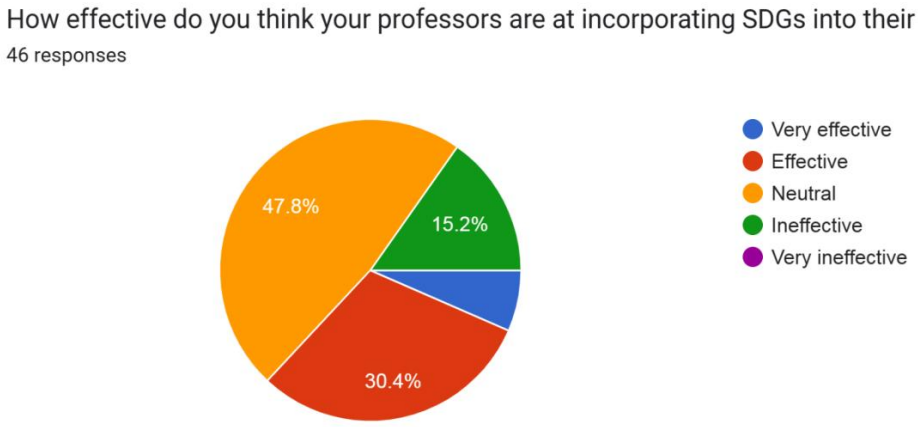
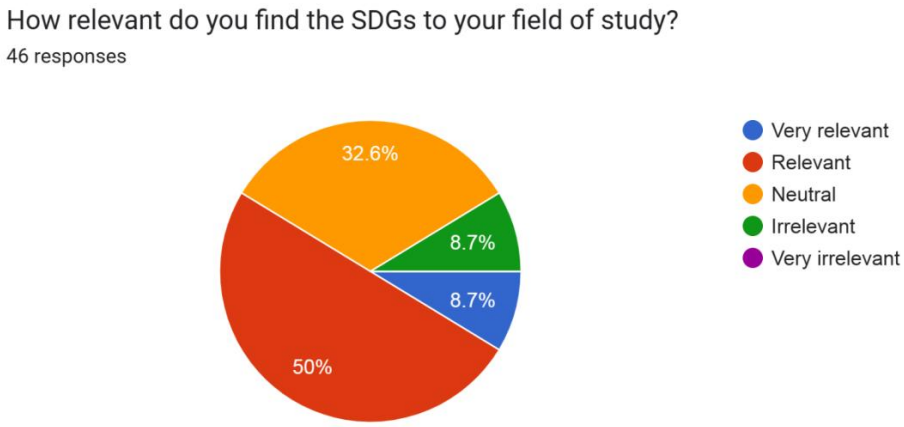


Figure 7.

How relevant do you find the SDGs to your field of study?

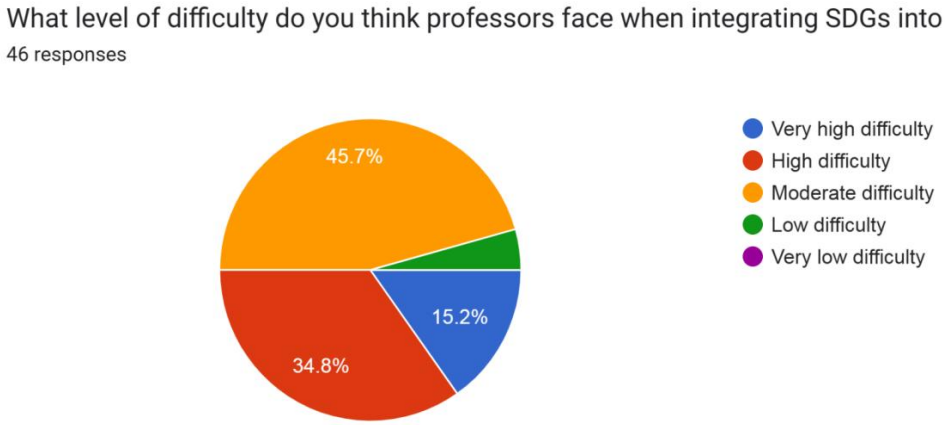


Regarding the effectiveness of professors at incorporating the SDGs into their teaching practices, 47.8% remained neutral, and 37.1% believed that professors can effectively integrate the SDGs into their teaching practices while 15.2% think that they are ineffective in doing so. These results can be explained by the fact that students are not well familiar with the notion of the SDGs (see Figure 4). Comparing Figures 6 and 4 reveals that almost the number of participants who are familiar with the SDGs is, to some extent, similar to the proportion that believes that professors can effectively integrate the SDGs into their teaching practices. Though 55.3% are not familiar with the SDGs (figure 4), only 8.7% of the participants believe that the SDGs are irrelevant to their field of study while the majority deem them relevant (58.7% in total). This explains why the majority (68.1% in total) strongly agrees or just agrees that integrating the SDGs into the curriculum can help them become active agents of change (see figure 5). This part deals with the second question regarding the effectiveness of incorporating the SDGs into the curriculum and teaching practices of teachers. The majority believe that the SDGs can be effectively incorporated into the curriculum due to the fact that students think they are relevant to their field of study and that the curriculum can support this, which can turn them into agents. This highlights that the second hypothesis is confirmed.

The challenges that students think that professors can face while incorporating the SDGs into their teaching practices

Figure 8.

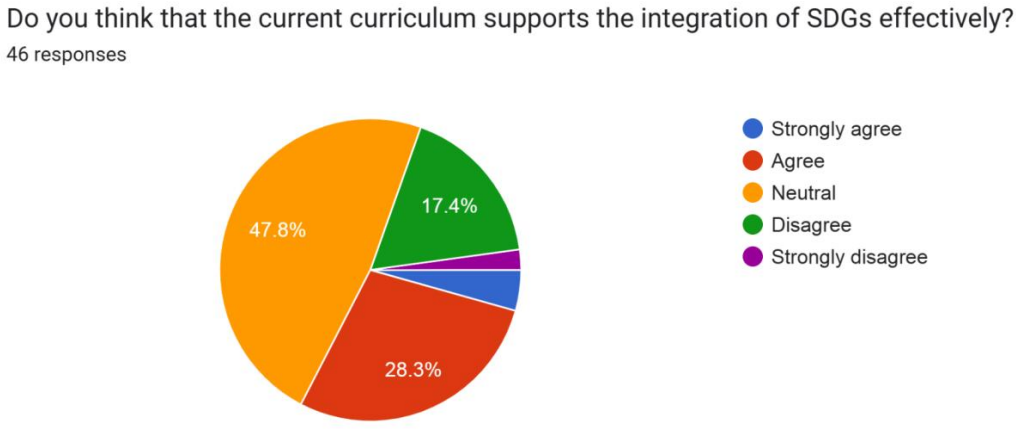
What level of difficulty do you think professors face when integrating the SDGs into their teaching?



The figure shows that 50% of the respondents believe that professors can face high and/or very high difficulty when integrating SDGs in their teaching, while 45.7% think that they may face moderate difficulty. Conversely, only 4.3% assume that professors may face low difficulty in doing so.

Figure 9.

Do you think that the current curriculum supports the integration of SDGs effectively?

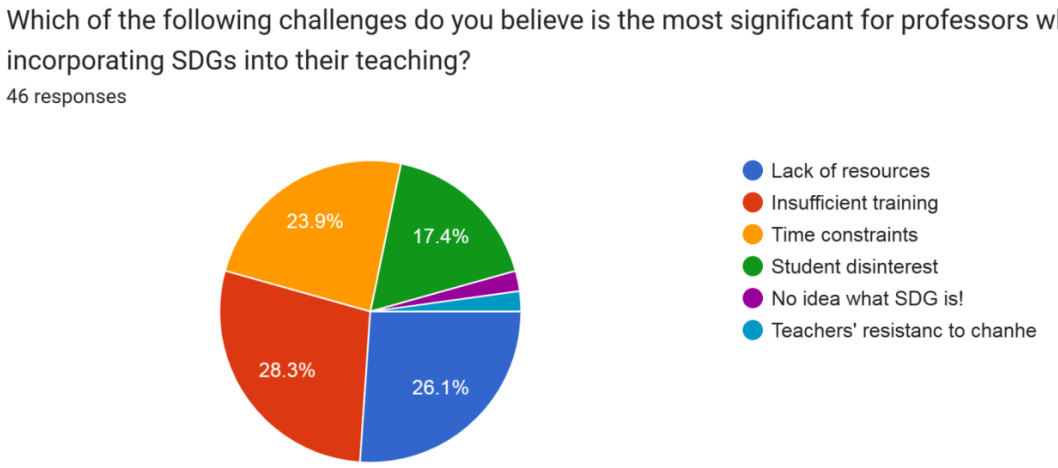


With regard to whether the current curriculum can support an effective integration of SDGs, 32.6% presume that the curriculum supports this, which implies that students believe that the current curriculum is flexible and can include different aspects that can enhance teaching and learning. On the other hand, 19.6% disagree or strongly disagree with that.

Figure 10.

Which of the following challenges do you believe is the most significant for professors when incorporating SDGs into their teaching?

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This question reveals which challenges that professors are more likely to face when incorporating the SDGs in their teaching practices. Insufficient training, lack of resources, time constraints, and students' disinterest are the main challenges that professors may face during their instructional practices, which confirms the third hypothesis.

In a similar vein, El Alaoui et al. (2024) indicate that one of the main challenges to implementing the SGDs in education is the insufficient resources, especially the financial ones. They also mentioned that unequal access to education and varying quality of education are among the obstacles that can hinder an effective implementation of the SDGs in teaching. El Karfa (2019) suggests that teachers should get enough training regarding how they can implement and turn students into agents, which explains why many participants choose insufficient training as the first obstacle that professors can encounter.

Through this analysis, it can be stated that all the research questions are answered and that all the hypotheses are confirmed. It was noticed that in some of the questions (Figures 7-9), a high proportion of the participants usually chooses neutral; this can indicate the lack of knowledge or awareness of the SDGs and the potential role they can play in education. That is why raising students' awareness about SDGs is of paramount importance. Based on this analysis, the following recommendations can be suggested:

Raising students awareness about the SDGs and their importance

Training teachers and professors about how they can incorporate the SDGs into their teaching practices

Increasing the presence of the SDGs into the curriculum and textbooks

Conclusion

Many Moroccan and foreign studies have tackled the implementation of the SDGs in education. However, these studies did not investigate how the SDGs can turn students into agents. That is why, this study investigates the issue of how integrating the SDGs in the curriculum and teaching practices of teachers can turn students into agents. Some of the main results of this study is that students tend to have positive perceptions about learner agency and show willingness to take initiatives in their learning since this can help them become active agents of change. However, more than half of the participants are not familiar with the notion of the United Nations' Sustainable Developmental Goals. In addition, the majority of the participants believe that the SDGs can be effectively incorporated into the curriculum due to its flexible nature. Concerning that challenges that professors can face while incorporating the SDGs into their teaching practices, many participants highlighted that training, resources and time constraints and students' disinterest are the main obstacles. Some of the limitations of this study are the context where it is conducted. It is conducted only within the faculty of Arts and Humanities at USMS Beni Mellal; therefore, the results cannot be widely generalized. Furthermore, the number of participants is small.

This study investigates only one aspect of this issue; therefore, investigating this topic in other contexts such as at the high school can yield more results about how the SDGs can change students into agents.

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