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Strategies, Beliefs, and Challenges: A Thematic Exploration of Self-Regulated Learning

Omar Baissane
Hassan Zaid
Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines English as a foreign language (EFL) students' perception of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies and motivational beliefs. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 25 students. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged from the analysis. These are approaches to goal orientations, perceptions of task value and self-efficacy, cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, and management of study time and environment. The findings revealed that students combine intrinsic and extrinsic goals, value tasks selectively, and employ varied cognitive, metacognitive, and time-management strategies. In general, Moroccan EFL learners demonstrate notable strengths in self-regulation and motivation. These results suggest the need for instructional approaches that explicitly introduce and scaffold SRL practices to enhance engagement and support sustained self-efficacy across contexts and academic levels and align teaching practices with learners' needs and goals.

Keywords: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, motivational beliefs, self-efficacy, self-regulated learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

Over three decades of research position SRL as a core concept through which students plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning (Losenno et al., 2020; Pintrich, 2004; Zimmerman, 1989, 2000). This study is framed by Zimmerman's cyclical model of SRL (Zimmerman, 2000), which conceptualizes SRL as a process with three phases, including forethought, performance, and self-reflection. This was integrated with motivational theories, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) to investigate students' beliefs, motivation and engagement in SRL strategies. In EFL contexts, motivation is shaped by language-specific identities and future selves (Dörnyei, 2005) and by sociocultural expectations regarding employability and success (Lamb, 2017).

Most studies on SRL have used quantitative methods (Baissane & Zaid, 2025; Kharroubi & El Mediouni, 2024). A significant example is the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich et al., 1991), which is still extensively used and has just received a fresh psychometric evaluation using modern confirmatory procedures (De Araujo et al., 2023). In addition to early meta-analyses linking SRL to academic achievement (Dent & Koenka, 2016) and theoretical mappings of SRL models (Panadero, 2017), more recent quantitative syntheses confirm the strong, positive relationship between SRL and academic achievement (Baissane & Zaid, 2025; Xu et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent measurement research has broadened SRL evaluation using newly validated instruments built for digital environments, such as the Self-Regulation for Learning Online (SRL-O) questionnaire (Broadbent et al., 2022). These studies are of great importance but often relate students' experiences to scaled academic achievement, which leaves a very important open question about how learners themselves interpret, experience, and negotiate SRL in their own words. This study serves this purpose by exploring student voices that explain how EFL learners describe their motivational orientations, such as goal orientations, task value, and self-efficacy, alongside their SRL practices, including cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and time and study management. Gaining insight into these constructs is critical. Within the same cyclical model of Zimmerman, the study further extends SRL theory by showing how Moroccan EFL students simultaneously manage intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, apply iterative learning strategies, and navigate digital distractions. This highlights adaptive and context-sensitive aspects of SRL that are not fully captured in prior models.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on L2 education has noted a conceptual transition from discrete learning strategies to a broader SRL concept that encompasses motivation as well (Oxford, 2017). Other research methods, such as meta-analyses, have provided empirical evidence of strong, positive correlations between SRL and achievement across many domains (Dent & Koenka, 2016). Moreover, mapping reviews emphasize the variety of SRL models and measurement approaches (Panadero, 2017). However, most research on SRL in Morocco has been conducted through surveys and experiments (Baissane & Zaid, 2025; Kharroubi & El Mediouni, 2024). Therefore, qualitative studies on students' perceptions of motivational orientations and SRL strategies through a qualitative lens remain scarce.

Recent qualitative studies have aimed to address this gap by demonstrating how SRL is understood and implemented in various contexts. For example, in the Chinese ESP classroom, Qiu et al. (2024) demonstrated that educators employed both explicit and implicit methods to promote SRL in cognitive and metacognitive domains. University instructors often employed self-assessment techniques; however, vocational educators used SRL less consistently, largely due to limited knowledge of SRL practices. Liu and Zhang (2023) investigated the experiences of Chinese English majors transitioning to university and found that negative academic experiences frequently prompted the use of SRL strategies. The findings also highlighted self-agency as an important factor in the development of SRL during academic transitions. In another study, Silva et al. (2023) examined the regulation strategies employed by programming students, who were categorized into high- and low-performing groups. The analysis identified significant variations in SRL practices and the use of psychological resources. Ellison and Tang (2025) also illustrated the effectiveness of a video annotation tool in supporting SRL among high school-acting students. Semistructured interviews indicated that the tool supported SRL activities and improved acting skills. In line with these findings, Ali (2026) demonstrated that metacognitive strategies significantly enhance SRL and academic success across both online and traditional learning environments and emphasized the role of digital tools in supporting learners' regulatory processes.

Technology-related studies have also explored the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in promoting SRL. For example, Suvorova and Demirbilek (2025) investigated the role of AI in developing metacognitive skills and SRL using adaptive learning systems that provide real-time feedback and personalized support. Similarly, Yildirim-Erbasli et al. (2023) investigated how AI-powered learning analytics might improve SRL by providing predictive insights, recommendations, and interactive scaffolding to learners, whereas Omoyajowo and Bambi (2025) found that AI technologies can improve SRL by facilitating planning, monitoring, and reflection, as well as increasing learners' metacognitive awareness and autonomy. Furthermore, recent studies further support the role of SRL and motivation in EFL and higher-education contexts. For instance, a network

analysis of Hong Kong EFL students demonstrated that students' self-regulated learning strategies, motivational beliefs, and perceived teacher support were interdependent, with goal setting, planning, and self-efficacy playing central roles in cooperative learning (Barry et al., 2026). Similarly, in Chinese EFL writing classrooms, researchers found that a growth mindset positively predicted SRL strategy use and writing engagement, while specific configurations of motivation and strategies were associated with higher engagement levels (Sun et al., 2026). Moreover, a systematic review in health sciences higher education confirmed that SRL positively correlates with academic performance and well-being, but skills do not always develop linearly, which highlights the importance of structured support and interventions (Verdugo & Martínez Líbano, 2026)

All these studies highlight various ways in which learners regulate their motivation through strategies such as task reappraisal, self-talk, environmental structuring, and the use of AI-supported technologies (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Navas Bonilla et al., 2025; Wolters, 2003). They also show how these practices are shaped by contextual factors, including institutional assessments, teacher behaviors, peer norms, and language-related anxieties. In EFL higher education contexts, where employment expectations and multilingual demands are particularly pronounced (Lamb, 2017), it is essential to consider students' perspectives to identify SRL strategies and motivational beliefs they possess. This study, situated within the Moroccan EFL context, seeks to contribute qualitative insights into how EFL university students understand their motivational orientations and SRL practices. Therefore, based on this objective, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL university students describe their motivational orientations, and what factors contribute to shaping them?

2. How do students describe their SRL strategies in their everyday study practices?

RESEARCH METHOD

The current study used a qualitative research method to examine students' perceptions of motivational orientations and SRL strategies. These constructs were derived from the literature on motivational orientations and SRL (Pintrich et al., 1991), which guided the development of the interview protocol and facilitated the emergence of themes from participants' narratives. That is, constructs such as

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, task value, and self-efficacy helped the formulation of interview questions that explored students' goal orientations and reasons for learning, their perceived importance of tasks, and their confidence in managing academic demands. In the same vein, key SRL strategies, including cognitive and metacognitive self-regulation strategies and time and study management, were used to elicit insights about students' self-regulatory practices. To achieve this aim, semistructured interviews were used, as they ensure that all participants were asked comparable questions and maintain flexibility for elaboration and clarification. They also allowed for flexibility and a certain degree of autonomy. According to Merriam (1998), semistructured interviews enable researchers to address the current situation, the respondent's evolving worldview, and novel notions regarding the subject matter (p. 74).

Participants

Semistructured interviews were conducted with a total of 25 participants, the point at which thematic saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006). Participants were selected through convenience sampling to ensure accessibility and to recruit those who were available and willing to participate. The sample included 14 females (56%) and 11 males (44%), drawn from three public Moroccan universities, including Cadi Ayyad (UCA), Sultan Moulay Slimane (USMS) and Mohamed 5th (M5U) universities. First year, second-year, third-year, and graduate students took part in the interview process. Regarding participant ages, seven participants (28%) were between 17 and 19 years old, ten participants (40%) were between 20 and 22 years old, and eight participants (32%) were older than 22 years old. The participants were native Moroccan Arabic speakers. They were within a similar university-age range, and no age-related differences were observed in the analysis.

Interview Protocol

The interview questions were developed in alignment with the study's purpose and research objectives and were informed by Pintrich et al.'s (1991) framework of SRL and motivation. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative interview questions should align with the research questions, theoretical constructs identified in the literature, and the overall data collection strategy. Therefore, the semistructured interview used in this study consisted of two sections. The first section contains questions on biographical data, including interviewees' age, current academic year, and university affiliation. The second section focuses on motivational orientations that influence their learning processes and outcomes and what drives their engagement and commitment. It also contains questions that allow participants to reflect on the strategies they used to manage their learning process and to assess how they organized their study habits.

Interview Procedure

Several students expressed their willingness to participate. However, due to the inconsistent availability of participants and the logistical challenges of conducting in-person interviews, both in-person and online methods were used. Video calls via WhatsApp served as an alternative solution to conduct remote interviews. Participants were verbally informed about the study's objectives, the importance of their contributions, and the confidentiality of their responses. They also provided informed consent before participation. Interviews conducted online were recorded with permission and securely stored on the researcher's device, and identifying information was removed during transcription to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved, which means that the information gathered became repetitive and no new insights were added (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews took place during the summer, a suitable time because both students and the researcher were on vacation. The interviews were conducted in English because it is the primary language of instruction in participants' academic programs in the English department. In addition, English was chosen to ensure consistency with the academic context and to allow participants to express concepts related to their learning experiences using familiar disciplinary language. The interviewer began with a few warm-up questions to help participants feel comfortable. Using a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions, it was not difficult to explore their personal experiences and perspectives regarding their motivation and learning strategies. Students were asked about their sources of motivation, how they set goals, and the SRL strategies they employed to manage their learning processes. The transcripts were prepared from the recorded interviews. Initial coding was performed using NVivo to organize the data, but themes were later reviewed and refined manually to stay closely engaged with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data (Braun et al., 2024). Thematic analysis was used due to its flexibility in generating and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis incorporated elements of both deductive and inductive approaches. In this regard, established SRL and motivational constructs identified in the literature (Pintrich et al., 1991) informed the deductive approach to the analysis, while the analysis remained open to themes inductively generated from participants' narratives. The reflexive thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006) used in this study consists of six stages. These are familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This means that the

process began with familiarization through transcription, repeated reading, and noting impressions related to motivation, such as intrinsic and extrinsic goal orientation, task value, and self-efficacy, and SRL constructs, such as elaboration, organization, metacognitive self-regulation, and time and study environment. Initial manual coding identified key expressions and behaviors, which were then grouped into broader categories and themes aligned with the study's objectives. Themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined before producing a coherent and meaningful report that integrated the findings with the research aims. Examples of the coding process and theme identification are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:
Sample Demonstrations of Coding and Thematic Organization

Code	Theme	When to use ?
Goal orientations	Students' Different Approaches to Goal Orientations	Apply this code when students report their intrinsic/extrinsic goal orientations
Task value and self-efficacy	Students' Beliefs About Task Importance and Their Abilities to achieve desirable learning outcomes	Apply this code when students report their interest toward tasks and their beliefs in their ability to achieve their learning goals
Cognitive and metacognitive strategies	Students' Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies to Approach Learning.	Apply this code when students report their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support their learning.
Time and study environment management	Students' Management of Their Study Time and Environment	Apply this code when students report their how they manage their study time and learning environment

Trustworthiness

To enhance the present study's internal validity, several tactics were employed. Internal validity, or credibility, was guaranteed by means of member checking and prolonged engagement. First, participants were able to examine and

validate the results through member checking. This entailed presenting the interview results to 11 participants to confirm that their opinions had been appropriately expressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Their feedback was generally confirmatory. Second, prolonged engagement was achieved by asking follow-up questions and spending enough time with participants. This facilitated the development of a positive relationship with participants in the current study, which resulted in more authentic responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, a colleague reviewed the coding and emerging themes to improve the analysis.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to explore students' SRL strategies and motivation through semistructured interviews, which were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). As a result, four themes were identified. These themes describe how students approach goal orientations, perceive the value of academic tasks and their own abilities, employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and manage their study time and environment. To illustrate these themes, representative extracts from participants' responses are presented. Student quotations are reported verbatim and assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Theme One: Students' Approaches to Goal Orientations

The first theme aligns with the intrinsic and extrinsic goals of participants. They were asked about their motivation and preferences with respect to the learning course materials in each module they studied at the university. Specifically, this question aimed at gauging and identifying students' motivation to learn and their attitude toward challenging course materials and the type of motivation they possess.

Participants expressed high motivation to learn the materials related to their modules. They showed a positive attitude toward their studies and recognized the relevance of these materials to their future careers.

"I'm motivated to learn the course materials in each module. I find the topics relevant to my future career aspirations. In addition, I believe that gaining this knowledge will promote my practical skills such as communication, problem solving, management and critical thinking." (female participant-CAU)

Participants had different opinions about having challenging materials throughout their courses. A number of them preferred challenging material, as they found it intellectually stimulating and engaging. It provided them with opportunities to grow academically and intellectually by mastering complex concepts.

"I prefer course materials that are challenging because they provide an opportunity for me to learn new things and deepen my understanding of the subjects I am studying. Difficult materials often push me to think, solve problems, improve my skills and encourage me to go beyond what I just have as course materials." (male participant-M5U)

In contrast, a few participants confessed that they preferred simpler course materials because complex content can hinder their understanding.

"I personally do not like difficult and complex materials. I prefer simplified course material that can help me understand quickly and easily, rather than ones that make the module complicated. Simplified materials help me stay focused, engaged and highly motivated." (male participant-SMSU)

When asked whether they prioritized obtaining good grades or gaining and understanding new knowledge, students reported different opinions based on their learning objectives, aims, priorities and goals. Some emphasized the importance of mastering content and applying it in real life:

"For me, the most important thing at university is learning and understanding the content. While getting good grades is important, I think that true learning goes beyond just memorizing information for exams. Understanding the content allows me to apply it in real-life situations, solve problems, and develop a deeper knowledge of the subject, which is more valuable in the long run." (male participant-M5U)

Others, on the other hand, admitted that their main objective was to obtain good grades and pass exams:

"Getting good grades is the most important thing to me. We can acquire knowledge anytime, but getting the grade and diplomas is important. I personally can't approach it the other way around." (male participant-CAU)

What is notable in this theme is that participants exhibited high levels of motivation. They appeared more intrinsically and extrinsically motivated and had a positive attitude toward their studies. It is worth mentioning that some students found challenging materials more relevant to their careers, but others considered them obstacles. They also had different priorities in relation to obtaining good grades and mastering the content. Some students recognized that getting good grades and passing exams are important; however, others prioritized mastering the content and developing their skills.

Theme Two: The Importance of Academic Tasks and Self-Efficacy in Achieving Desirable Outcomes

The second theme is related to two significant psychological concepts that play a pivotal role in students' motivation and behaviors not only in education but also in various realms. These are task value and self-efficacy. During the

interviews, participants were asked about their interest and appreciation of the content of the modules they study at the university. They were also asked about their confidence in their abilities to perform well in their academic tasks.

Generally, the majority of the participants reported that they value only modules that seem to be appealing to them, align with their academic goals, enhance their learning experience, broaden their understanding of the target language, and offer practical insights that they can apply in real life.

"I am not interested in all the modules. I'm truly into a few that are more relevant to my future goals such as public speaking and applied linguistics because they connect with what I want to do in my career and they offer practical aspects that I can use in real life." (male participant-CAU)

Regarding self-efficacy, participants' confidence largely depended on the complexity of the modules. Many doubted their ability to succeed in all modules but believed that effort could make a difference.

"I am not confident enough in understanding each module's content because some modules are difficult to master. I just struggle to pass them." (male participant-SMSU)

Other participants acknowledged that their performance was not always predictable but remained motivated to make progress.

"I don't usually have high expectations to pass each single module. In fact, I don't overpressure myself and get disappointed by the end… However, I always work in a way that allows me to get grades, pass the exams, and that makes me satisfied." (female participant-SMSU)

When asked about their motivation for starting and continuing university, participants emphasized career aspirations and personal goals.

"Getting an English degree is promising. I always wanted to prepare myself for a good career and build a stable future with an English BA. Therefore, I will stick with my goal until I achieve it." (female participant-CAU)

In the Moroccan educational setting, it is not common for EFL learners to have high self-efficacy and expectations. These traits are variable and affected by many factors, including the complexity of module content, language abilities, motivation, past experiences, and more.

Theme Three: Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies to Approach Learning

The previous themes focused on motivation, while the two remaining themes were directly connected to SRL strategies, mainly cognitive, metacognitive strategies, and resource management. Cognitive strategies such as elaboration and organization help students promote their learning process and remember information. Metacognitive strategies involve monitoring and regulating one's own learning process.

Participants reported that they regularly use different sources, especially the internet and academic articles, to deepen their understanding of the courses.

"Yes, when I do not understand the lesson or want to add more knowledge, I check other references such as books and PDFs and other documents in order to support my learning." (female participant-CAU)

They also emphasized the importance of summarizing content as a way to facilitate understanding and retention.

"After going through the lectures of each module, I spend some time writing brief summaries of the main ideas. These summaries help me sharpen my understanding and serve as an authentic reference." (female participant-M5U)

Organization was highlighted through the use of outlines, semantic maps, and note-taking strategies.

"I like summarizing the whole course into semantic maps, I use highlighters, post it notes, colorful paper and other different tools to keep my courses tidy and neat for better revision." (female participant-CAU)

Metacognitive strategies were also evident, as students reflected on what they had learned and sought clarification when needed.

"Reflecting on what I have learned is so important. It helps me make sure that I am not just memorizing facts but actually understanding the material." (female participant-SMSU)

Although not all students mentioned using these strategies, the findings indicate a significant development in their metacognitive monitoring and regulation, which supports academic achievement.

Theme Four: Management of Study Time and Environment

The final theme addresses resource management. It entails the management of time and study space as well as dealing with distractions. In this regard, participants reported numerous SRL strategies. Indeed, participants used different learning strategies, but the majority of them recognized the importance of having a specific place and time to succeed in the modules.

They reported minimizing distractions by studying in quiet places and limiting technological interruptions.

"I put my phone away as far as I can. I also choose a quiet place to study I won't be distracted by anything or anyone." (female participant-CAU)

Some admitted that digital devices still caused distractions, but they were aware of the risks and tried to manage them.

"I try to keep myself away from distractions, but not all the time because I use phones and computers as sources of information and sometimes, they turn out to be sources of distractions easily." (female participant-CAU)

For time management, students expressed two main approaches. Some preferred flexibility:

"I don't truly plan it. I study based on exam deadlines and urgent events, and I try to adjust my plans accordingly." (male participant-CAU)

Others adhered to strict schedules to remain organized and avoid last-minute cramming:

"I create a daily schedule with specific times to study… I find it helpful to remain organized and focused." (male participant-SMSU)

In this theme, it is evident that approaches varied among students; however, they agreed that effective time and environment management are essential for academic success.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore how Moroccan EFL university students perceive their motivation and use SRL strategies in their everyday academic lives. To achieve this aim, semistructured interviews were conducted. In this regard, four themes were generated. The first theme relates to students' approaches to goal orientations. The second is about students' perceptions of the importance of academic tasks and their beliefs in their own abilities to achieve desirable outcomes. The third theme focuses on cognitive and metacognitive strategies to approach learning. The final theme concerns students' management of study time and their study environment.

The first important finding is related to students' approaches to goal orientations. Many students expressed intrinsic motivation, associating their learning with personal growth and future careers, whereas others emphasized extrinsic goals such as grades and certification. These different viewpoints have been observed elsewhere, where intrinsic goals are generally linked to deep learning and persistence, while extrinsic orientations often prioritize performance outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This was supported by Moroccan studies conducted by Baissane and Zaid (2025), who highlighted that intrinsic motivation correlates with metacognitive strategies and that extrinsic motivation aligns more with surface learning strategies than with deep learning strategies. The findings of this study align with these insights. These results are also consistent with findings in China, where Liu and Zhang (2023) showed that students' negative academic experiences often triggered stronger self-regulation. Likewise, Lamb (2017) emphasized that in EFL contexts, employment expectations and certification remain strong external drivers, which resonates with Moroccan students' emphasis on grades and qualifications. The combination of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations found in this study may reflect students' conflicting personal academic interests and systemic pressures related to employment and university exams. It also implies that motivation in this setting is not fixed but rather negotiated in response to institutional expectations and future career concerns.

The second theme emphasizes students' perceptions of the importance of academic tasks and their self-efficacy for achieving desirable outcomes. In this regard, participants value modules that were clearly connected to their future goals,

such as applied linguistics, public speaking, and linguistics, but they often feel less confident with modules perceived as difficult or complex. This aligns with expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), which posits that students' effort is shaped by how valuable they perceive a task to be and how capable they feel of succeeding in it. Similar results were reported by Omari (2024), who found that EFL students' persistence at university is strongly related to the interplay of motivation and self-efficacy. In the present study, students admitted having doubts about mastering all modules, but they stayed motivated by their long-term goals. This reflects Qiu et al.'s (2024) observation that teacher practices, such as encouraging self-assessment, play a decisive role in forming how students perceive both the value of a task and their self-efficacy. Moreover, Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) argue that motivational regulation strategies, including task reappraisal and self-talk, can directly strengthen self-efficacy, which may explain why Moroccan students persist despite uncertainties. The selective value of modules observed in this study may suggest that students deliberately direct their efforts toward areas they view as yielding more academic or professional benefits. Their changing levels of confidence in harder courses may also be due to gaps in their previous preparation or the way assessments are conducted that affect how difficulty and competence are understood.

The third theme concerned cognitive and metacognitive strategies for approaching learning. In relation to this theme, students described elaboration strategies, such as summarizing and checking other materials; organization strategies, such as creating outlines and semantic maps; and metacognitive strategies, such as reviewing notes, self-questioning, and seeking help from peers. These strategies align closely with SRL frameworks (Zimmerman, 2002; Pintrich, 2004), which emphasize the cyclical processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluating. In the same vein, Baissane and Zaid (2025) reported that EFL learners who engage in cognitive and metacognitive strategies achieve promising academic outcomes. Again, these findings reinforce the view that SRL in learning is not a fixed trait but a set of practices that can be enhanced and expanded through instruction and interventions. The variation in students' reported strategies echoes Silva et al.'s (2023) categorization of high- and low-performing learners, where SRL practices were unevenly distributed. Furthermore, Ellison and Tang (2025) demonstrated that technological scaffolds, such as video annotation tools, can support reflection and metacognition, which points to potential directions for strengthening SRL in Moroccan and international EFL classrooms. Furthermore, the inconsistent distribution of these strategies may be attributed to disparities in past training, academic socialization, or exposure to explicit strategy instruction. It also implies that students are aware of regulatory mechanisms, but the extent and consistency with which they are applied may be determined by contextual support and pedagogical supervision.

Finally, the fourth theme highlighted students' time and study management dimensions of SRL. Most students reported creating quiet and safe study spaces and minimizing distractions, but digital devices such as phones remained a recurring source of difficulty for them. Students differed in their scheduling approaches, as some preferred flexibility, whereas others adhered to strict routines, which illustrates what Rayyan Cheong et al. (2024) described as the critical role of time management and environmental structuring in academic achievement. The challenge of balancing digital tools as both resources and distractions support findings in broader educational research, where online environments complicate SRL (Junco, 2012). This also resonates with Wolters' (2003) emphasis on environmental structuring as a motivational regulation strategy, where learners deliberately modify their surroundings to maintain focus. As Panadero (2017) noted, resource-management strategies remain a vital, although often underexamined, dimension of SRL, as highlighted by the present study. Digital distractions continue, which suggests a disconnection between metacognitive awareness and behavioral management among students. In today's educational environments, the link between academic and social digital activities makes environmental management more difficult than previously assumed. The increasing availability of AI technologies may act as cognitive scaffolding and shortcuts, which enhance students' engagement in independent learning processes and promote self-regulation (Trinovita et al., 2025).

In general, the findings of this study support Zimmerman's (2002) model and add to it in two important ways. First, the findings on students' goal orientations and task valuation demonstrate how culturally embedded goals, such as employment aspirations and qualification requirements, influence the motivational side of SRL. Second, the abundance of digital distractions in students' time and environmental management suggests that environmental regulation has become more complex than past models predicted. These two complexities imply that the recurring patterns of students' SRL strategies are resilient in that learners consistently maintain and adapt their approaches even when facing challenges or distractions, but their manifestation is heavily influenced by sociocultural and technological contexts. Moreover, this study contributes to existing research by providing fresh, significant, and enriching insights into how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations coexist and are actively negotiated. Instead of perceiving these orientations as opposing forces, the study found that students demonstrate both intrinsic motivation, engaging with tasks that are personally meaningful, such as applied linguistics or public speaking, and extrinsic motivation, such as aiming for high grades or certification. Both types of motivation support ongoing engagement and the persistence of SRL strategies. This balance is evident in the way students selectively prioritize tasks that align with long-term professional goals while also remaining attentive to institutional expectations. Furthermore, the study identifies a notable tension between metacognitive awareness and behavioral regulation in

digitally mediated environments. Students demonstrate awareness of strategies such as planning, monitoring, and reflecting, but they often struggle to consistently implement these behaviors, as seen in difficulties managing digital distractions. This contradiction highlights that SRL is not only about knowing effective strategies but also about successfully enacting them, which emphasizes the need for interventions to consider both cognitive insight and practical behavioral regulation.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry important implications for English language teaching and learning in higher education. Students' dual motivational orientations suggest that instruction should acknowledge both the drive for mastery and the pressure of performance outcomes. Teachers can enhance intrinsic motivation by linking modules more clearly to students' personal goals and future careers, which may increase task value and sustain engagement. For instance, instructors might begin a module by asking students to articulate how specific course objectives relate to their professional aspirations or by incorporating short career-oriented reflection tasks at key points during the semester. At the same time, they can help students balance extrinsic aims by emphasizing that grades and qualifications are important but should not overshadow deeper learning. Because students reported frequent use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as summarizing, organizing, and reflecting, instructors could build on these practices by explicitly teaching how to apply them more effectively and consistently across modules. This could include modeling how to create structured outlines for readings, demonstrating think-aloud strategies while analyzing a text, or integrating brief end-of-class reflective prompts that ask students to evaluate which strategies were most effective for them. Classroom activities that integrate reflection, peer discussion, and independent research may also promote greater self-efficacy and a stronger sense of ownership over the learning process.

At the curricular and institutional level, the results highlight the need to integrate explicit training in SRL strategies into higher education programs. Modules that combine theoretical content with practical applications are particularly valuable as SRL strategies because they provide students with structured opportunities to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning while applying knowledge to real-world tasks. Curriculum designers may, for example, incorporate structured SRL checkpoints into syllabi, such as scheduled goal-setting exercises, guided self-assessment rubrics, or portfolio tasks that require students to document their method use throughout the semester. Time management and digital distraction also emerged as significant challenges. Many universities already offer workshops or support services for study skills, time management, and SRL, but the findings of this study suggest that these supports do not fully address

challenges in digitally mediated learning environments. Universities could therefore consider offering workshops or support services that guide students in structuring their study time, creating productive learning environments, and purposefully using technology. A brief SRL support course might be structured around three components. These are identifying personal academic goals, practicing cognitive and metacognitive skills through guided activities, and developing individualized plans for time management and digital distractions. These suggestions are applicable to the Moroccan EFL context; however, they are indicative of the challenges and regulatory demands that are becoming more apparent in higher education settings worldwide.

LIMITATIONS

There are various limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the interviews were conducted in English, which, although the language of instruction, may have constrained some participants' ability to fully express clear reflections and ideas. Second, the sample was limited to students from only three Moroccan universities, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the study relied on self-reported data, which could be influenced by participants' perceptions, even though steps were taken to ensure authenticity through member checking and prolonged engagement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the objective of this study is to investigate how EFL Moroccan university students understand their motivational orientations and SRL practices. Data analysis revealed that Moroccan EFL learners adopt various motivational profiles because they are simultaneously driven by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, they selectively value tasks linked to their goals, and they combine traditional and adaptive SRL strategies. More importantly, the findings illustrated that students are aware of the importance of self-regulation, but they also face challenges such as exhibiting low self-efficacy in difficult modules and having difficulty managing digital distractions. Generally, these findings have added new insights to recent qualitative studies across other contexts (Qiu et al., 2024; Liu & Zhang, 2023; Silva et al., 2023), which demonstrated that SRL is shaped not only by students' personal motivation but also by their interactions with teachers, peers, and learning environments.

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Omar BAISSANE, PhD, is an adjunct professor at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic (UM6P), Morocco, and a Cambridge CELTA-certified English instructor. He holds dual bachelor's degrees in French and English, with a specialization in linguistics, and earned his master's degree in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching in 2021. His research interests include applied linguistics, language learning and teaching, higher education, and self-regulated learning. Email: baissaneomar@gmail.com

Dr. Hassan ZAID is an Associate Professor and researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Beni Mellal. He holds a Doctorate in Education (2013) from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Rabat, with dissertation exploring the role of culture in Amazigh language teaching. Prior to this, he earned an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Mohamed V University's School of Education in Rabat (2006). He is a co-founder of the Master's program in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching at his institution. His research interests include applied linguistics, TEFL, Amazigh

language teaching, learner individual differences, educational technology, and critical pedagogy. Email: zaidhassan37@gmail.com