The Impact of Interest on EFL Learners' Performance

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Abstract
This study sought to investigate Moroccan EFL students' perceptions of the factors behind their interest and disinterest in university courses. Besides, it tried to explain how and why their interest in English as a major has increased or declined. Finally, the researcher tried to investigate whether or not there is a relationship between students' interest and their achievement outcomes. 132 EFL university students took part in this study. Data was collected using group interviews and a students' interest scale (SIS). The results indicated that students attributed their interest to content that provides them with novelty, competence and challenge and courses that engage them and develop their critical thinking and analytical skills. On the other hand, students blamed teachers, teaching methods and difficulty for their lack of interest in a course. Most students reported that their interest has increased and explained that by factors like mastery, goal-direction and language status. The results also indicated a positive relationship between students' level of interest and their achievement outcomes.

Key words: EFL, Higher education, Interest, interest development, learners' performance, learning motivation

Introduction:

It is almost axiomatic that motivation plays a central role in every human endeavor and there is substantial empirical evidence that it is a precursor to acquisition and learning (Schlechty, 2001; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). However, Teachers are daily confronted with the perennial task of kindling and maintaining motivation in their students. Every day, educators express concerns over dwindling levels of motivation for learning in today's generation of learners and fall short of finding ways to foster their engagement despite abounding studies and theories that have scrutinized motivation. Nevertheless, the difficulty to promote motivation in learners is not an abnormal thing given the fact that it is not a simple issue and hardly is a 'unitary phenomenon' (Rueda & Moll, 1994;. Thus trying to construct a definition of what motivation is and how it can be instigated and maintained is a challenging task. In the light of this, Dornyei (1998) states that "there is little agreement in the literature"(p.?) about the concept of motivation. However, some attempts at defining motivation can be traced in the literature. For instance, Graham and Weiner (1996) define motivation as the study of "why people think and behave as they do".(p.) According to Pintrich (2003), the term motivation is derived from the latin verb 'movere' meaning 'to move'. Therefore, studies of motivation are concerned with what pushes or pulls people to take action towards an objective.

Earlier theories of motivation, such as Maslow's theory of need and Hull's (1943, 1951) drive theory of motivation drew on the behaviorist paradigm and built their models on the individuals inner factors without consideration of the social context. The focus of such theories was to find the motors of behavior and to understand what moved a static organism. Hence, motivational psychologists during that era emphasized individual factors like drive, instinct, arousal, and needs (Dornyei, 1998; Pintrich, 2003). Besides, classic theories of motivation sought to provide a general, simplistic account of human behavior and to draw broad models of motivated behaviors (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Obviously, the question why humans act in a given way or decide to finish or not finish a given task is no simple phenomenon. Therefore, providing a simple, straightforward answer would seem impossible. This is why current theories of motivation no longer consider it a static construct and or a mere reflection of internal factors such as instincts and physical energy. Rather, focus has shifted to how the individual's thoughts, emotions and beliefs interact with the social environment to yield a given behavior. Thus, motivation is viewed as a set of mental processes that trigger and maintain action. Within this new perspective, social psychologists have tried to shed light on the mental processes involved in motivation, how these function and affect learning and achievement and how they can be triggered, reinforced and maintained at high levels.

Based on this post-modern paradigm, a number of theories and models have been construed. The most influential of these theories are expectancy-value theories initiated by Atkinson and Raynor (1974) who explained human achievement on the basis of two constructs: expectancy and value. In the light of this theory, motivation to carry out a task is determined by the individual's expectancy of success and the value she/he attaches to that task. This perspective has been extended and elaborated by other researchers who elaborated other cognitive processes and constructed various theories and models such as causal attribution theory (Weiner, 1979, 1986), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1993) and self-worth theory (Covington, 19992). Other theories such as goal theories have provided an alternative perspective to need theories through replacing needs by goals which are seen as 'the engine' that triggers the action and guides it in the right direction. Deci and Ryan (1985) introduce   the self-determination theory which

elaborated the traditional intrinsic/ extrinsic paradigm. Under self-determination theory, intrinsic and extrinsic motives are no more viewed as dichotomous and mutually exclusive constructs but are seen within a continuum where external factors can shape, sustain and interact with intrinsic motivation (See Dornyei, 1998).

As stated above, this new paradigm of studying human behavior, in general, and academic achievement, in particular, came to view motivation as a complex mental endeavor that involves a number of cognitive and affective process that manifest themselves in a given behavior or lack of it. Behavior, therefore, has been viewed as the result of a number of motivational forces that combine together to push people to action. One of the most important forces among these is 'interest in the task or the activity'. This facet of motivation is considered by early education psychologists such as Herbart (1776-1841) and Dewey (1913) as a catalyst to learning. This paper seeks to shed some focus on this construct by reporting the findings of an investigation of how Moroccan EFL students express their interest or disinterest in a subject and whether or not there is a relationship between their interest and their performance in those courses. The rationale behind studying interest in Moroccan EFL students emanates first from the findings of a study of Moroccan EFL learners' causal attributions of success and failure by Zohri (2011) which indicates that most Moroccan EFL learners and teachers impute students' failure and success to interest. Furthermore, researchers have shown that Studying how students account for their interest or lack of it can provide educators and researchers with insight on how this interest or disinterest develops and can therefore help them devise strategies to develop, maintain and grow interest. The following section provides a review of the literature on interest (Deci, 1992; Deci, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Hidi, Renninger, & Krapp, 1992; Flowerday & Lehman, 2001)

1.   Review of literature:

As mentioned earlier, Herbart (1776-1841) was the first to develop a doctrine of interest. He considered interest as a 'self-activitity' that determines attention and thus results in readiness to form new ideas. Therefore, for Herbart, effective teaching means triggering interest in pupils and guiding them towards creating knowledge (Kirkpatrick, 2008). Building on Herbatian philosophy, Dewey (1913) stresses the major importance of interest in learning. For Dewey, "to be interested in any matter is to be concerned with it" (p. 16). He defined interest as the state of being "engaged, engrossed, or entirely taken up with some activity because of its recognized worth" (ibid). Ibid: Never used in APA Style; instead give each citation using author names as usual

The ideas of Herbart and Dewey, albeit very interesting, were drowned by research in behaviorism which dominated all fields of inquiry up to the 1960's and 1970's when psychologists from various areas of expertise turned their attention to interest. Researchers in social psychology and achievement motivation renewed focus on interest as a key factor in learning and a catalyst of strong motivation and successful performance. Current definitions of interest identify it as a mental process and a psychological state that supports learning and facilitates performance and achievement (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010; Hidi, 1990, 2000; Krapp, Hidi& Renninger 1992).

One of the leading current conceptualizations of interest has been developed by Hidi & Baird (1988) and Renninger (2000) who divide interest into two main categories: individual interest

and situational interest. Individual interest is stable and is specific to the individual. It can be perceived as a psychological disposition or readiness to act or do a task and it has been associated with increased knowledge, positive emotions, and increased reference value (Renninger, Hidi, &Krapp 1992). Situational interest is triggered by certain conditions and objects in the environment. However, these two forms of interest should not be thought of as dichotomous but as complementary as each type interacts with and affects the other. Besides, both of them can be described from the perspective of either the external factor that stimulates interest or the internal disposition of the individual who displays interest in a given subject or activity (Renninger, 1989, 1990; Renninger et al., 1992). Hence, it can be deduced that interest is manifest in various forms and always results from an interaction between the individual and the environment. This model of interest has recently been elaborated by Hidi and Renninger (2006) who underlined the central role of the interaction between the person and the object in the development of enduring forms of interest (from triggered situational interest to maintained situational interest, and from emerged individual interest to well-developed individual interest). They claim that personal characteristics and social contexts both contribute to the generation of interest and increase the level of engagement that individuals bring to any activity.

Research also describes interest as a construct that includes both affective and cognitive components that interact with a particular content to boost engagement. The affective component is composed of positive emotions such as pleasure and joy felt through engaging with the content and the environment while the cognitive components relate to perceptual and representational activities related to engagement (Hidi, 2003; Hidi et al., 2004). According to Schiefele (1992), interest is always content specific and acts as a directive force and an explanatory factor that can help us understand students' choices and motivation as well as teachers' subjective theories of instruction. In his model of domain learning, Alexander (1997, 2004) claims that the amount of knowledge a person has does not necessarily mean that she/he will show a well-developed interest in this content. Rather, Interest develops as a result of the interaction between knowledge of content and positive feelings. More importantly, an individual may have substantial knowledge and little interest of content (Renninger et al., 2002). As Dewey (1913) points out, interest is dynamic, objective and personal. It is dynamic because it entails engagement with the activity. As process-oriented theories and studies indicate, interest "shows itself in particular psychological states, such as focused, prolonged, relatively effortless attention" (Renninegr et al. 1992).

The models and theories outlined above have stressed the important role of interest in learning and the great impact it has on processes such as attention, effort and perseverance. In the light of this, a number of recent empirical studies have demonstrated that interest facilitates learning and boosts performance by enhancing attention, recall, task persistence, and effort (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Hidi, 1990; Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler (1992) reported a positive correlation between individual interest and academic performance in over 150 studies that investigated the relationship between interest and achievement. Other studies have shown that different levels of interest affect goal setting, and learning strategies. Harackieswicz et al. (2002) for instance, reported that interest mediates college students' choice of major and contributes to academic outcomes. Renninger 2002 also found that 11-to 1 3-year-old students with low ability and a well-developed individual interest for reading or mathematics were more likely to engage meaning of the text than were high ability students with less developed

individual interest. A recent study from Long and Murphy (2005) showed how teachers can support students' interest if they themselves have interest for the subject matter and the students they are teaching. Helping students feel more positive about the content they are learning can trigger early phases of interest and enhance students' attention (Hidi & Renninger, 2006)

Harckiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink and Tauer (2008) carried out two longitudinal studies with college students from their first semester as freshmen through graduation and found that both situational and individual interest can play a powerful role in predicting future choices and career paths. Similar results have been reached with middle- and high- school students (Meece, Wigfield and Eccles, 1990; Xiang, Chen and Bruene, 2005). Xiang et al. (2005) found that fourth graders were more willing to spend their free time engaged in running when they showed interest in a school based program than when they didn't which indicates that interest can affect subsequent similar activities and predict students' performance in various tasks.

Allowing students to choose tasks, promoting autonomy as well as providing support for developing knowledge required for task completion are some ways educators can adopt to trigger positive feelings about new content. (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

2. Methodology
2.1 Objectives and research questions:
This study set off with the attempt to investigate the reasons behind Moroccan EFL learners 'interest or disinterest in the courses they study at university, the development of their interest in English as a university major, and the relationships between their interest levels and their achievement outcomes. Therefore, it purported to answer the following questions:

Q1: How do EFL students explain their interest or disinterest in the courses they are studying at university?

Q2: How and why does students interest in English as a major change overtime?

Q3: Is there a relationship between students' levels of interest and their academic performance?

2.2 Method and data collection
This study used a mixed research method with a survey design. Group interviewing together with a seven likert-item students interest scale "SIS" were used for data collection. The SIS was built on the basis of the definitions and models of academic interest reviewed above. This questionnaire contained questions about the development of students' interest and why it has increased or declined, the courses they were interested and disinterested in as well as a rating of the reasons behind their interest or disinterest. The participants were also asked to provide grades for these courses and further explanations about their interest. The interviews were used as a springboard to the questionnaire and a complementary tool to gather more information on students' perceptions of their interest. It aimed at having access to some perceptions that may not be elicited through the structured questions of the questionnaire so as to provide a valuable insight to the interpretation of the quantitative results. Besides, qualitative data gathered through this whole group interview was meant to validate the results of the questionnaire and provide further explanation to some of the constructs included in the SIS.

Data was collected from three Moroccan Universities (University Chouaib Doukali in Al-Jadida, University Hassan II, Mohamedia, and University Mohammed V, Souissi, Rabat) using

convenience sampling. 132 students majoring in English and studying in their S4 (second semester of the freshman year) took part in this research. The researcher gathered data during class sessions. First, the students were given a brief definition of 'interest' on the basis of four items: a-classroom engagement and attention, b- Effort invested in studying for a given subject, c- the amount of time spent studying, d- the positive feelings experienced when studying a specific course. Then they were asked to think of courses they were interested in and those they were not interested in and asked to contemplate the reasons behind their interest. After that, they were given sticky notes in two different colors and were asked to write the reasons down on them and stick them on the board under two columns with the titles 'interest'/ 'disinterest'. In the second phase, the students were given the SIS and were asked to fill in the questions. They were encouraged to ask for help if they did not understand the written instructions.

The data gathered from the SIS was coded, transcribed and analyzed using the SPSS software. First, descriptive statistics were run to summarize frequency data for interest/disinterest factors. Second, students' ratings of their interest in major at entry and the present time were compared using means analysis. Finally the means for the students' grades on interest/disinterest courses were counted and a paired-sample t-test was conducted to measure for significance between the two variables.

3. Results:

The first question of this study concerns how EFL students explain their interest or disinterest in the courses they study at university. The findings of this study indicate that the students believed that courses that trigger their interest are those that allow them to learn new material and have interesting content. Besides, the results show that the participants also rated attractive teaching methods and challenging tasks as important factors in stimulating their interest. On the other hand, fewer students attributed their interest to the fact that the material was easy to understand (see table 1 for a summary of these results).

Table1: *Factors affecting students' interest*

Factors for Interest	Frequencies
New material	87.9%
Interesting content	80.3%
Attractive teaching method	56.8%
Challenging tasks	56.8%
Easy material	37.1%

The group interviews elicited about 39 factors that students think stimulate their interest (Check table3 for a summary of these factors). These factors can be grouped under four categories: a- Levels of involvement, b- The content and skills taught, c- The teacher and teaching methods, and d- personal/intrinsic factors. First, students explain their interest mainly by factors linked to the levels of engagement and autonomy they have in class. For instance, a lot of students reported that the level of participation and the degree of freedom of expression they are allowed during classes helped them develop high interest in a specific course. A big number of students stated that the courses they were interested in were those which gave them enough room to debate their ideas and think critically about life issues. Furthermore, data elicited from the participants shows that interesting courses teach interesting content that broadens students'

knowledge of various disciplines, exposes them to different cultures and teaches them interpersonal and communicative skills. Interesting content has also been described in terms of novelty of information and relatedness to the learners' expectations and goals. In this vein, numerous participants stated that they felt more likely to make effort and engage attention in courses like linguistic studies and cultural studies and considered the topics discussed in these classes to be practical and enriching because they help them improve their linguistic skills and learn how to deal with people from different backgrounds. More importantly, students thought that these courses were interesting because they trigger their creativity, analytical skills and critical thinking.

A third important factor that students used to explain their interest relates to teachers and teaching methods. The participants reported that some teachers are skillful enough to turn the least interesting content into an exciting experience and are able to engage students in active learning and thinking. They also believed that some teachers make the course interesting by encouraging students to participate and providing them with a relaxed classroom environment. Another group of participants thought that the courses were interesting because the teachers were funny and friendly.

Finally some of the least cited factors can be considered personal or intrinsic motives like being a fan of British culture or English music bands. One participant stated that she is highly interested in translation because she has an excellent hand writing in Arabic and she loves writing it. Others said that English is a passion for them and that they like learning it for the sake of knowing more about it. One of the most important answers comes from a student who stated "I'm here (at university) to learn and not to choose what I want, thus I have to admire and 'accept' everything I'm studying.

The second part of the question concerns the reasons why students do not feel interested in some courses. Data from the questionnaire shows that most participants attribute their disinterest to the teacher and the teaching as well as the content of the course. The 'difficulty' factor and 'lack of novel material' were not considered as important. The results from the groups' interviews indicate that the participants cited 'the teacher factor', 'the level of difficulty' and 'lack of involvement' as the main factors behind their disinterest in a course. The students stated that some teachers use 'old' teaching methods, do not prepare for courses and are talkative. Others complained about the teachers not being friendly and using Arabic in class or not checking attendance. Another group of subjects explained that their interest was deeply affected by the level of difficulty of the course. They said that they failed to understand the content and therefore could not achieve positive outcomes. Thus, their interest waned in those courses. Another important reason that was elicited from the interviews is linked to the level of engagement students feel in a course. The learners believed that courses that do not allow them to express their thoughts and do not call for their critical thinking are not interesting. Actually, one of the words that was frequently cited by the interviewees was the word "repression". The students said that in some classes they are not allowed to express their opinion or disagree with the ideas voiced by the teacher. Therefore, for them those classes were boring and the content was dull.

Table2: *Factors influencing students' disinterest*

Factors for disinterest	Frequencies

Teaching method	53%
Uninteresting content	50.8%
Difficult content	37%
Lack of novelty	28.8%

At a second level, the subjects cited factors that are linked to the lack of practicality of some courses like poetry or drama. A few participants believed that these courses do not teach anything interesting and do not help them improve their English. They thought that such courses make them feel "stupid". A fewer number of subjects attributed their disinterest to factors that can be labelled 'personal' or 'intrinsic' by stating that they simply hate the course without knowing the reason. One more student claimed that he always feels hungry in class that is why he is not interested in learning, whereas another one claimed that he hates transportation (i.e. the means of transportation that he takes from home to university and back forth) and therefore he is not interested in studies.

Table3: *A summary of the factors elicited through the interviews*

Factors for interest	Factors for lack of interest

Content:
   Novelty + Mastery skilss+ critical thinking+ Analytical skills
   Scientific+ Informative+ challenging
   (Linguistics+ cultural studies+ writing)
	The teacher/ teaching
	Boring

Involvement: Participation+ Freedom of expression+ stress free	**The level of difficulty** Too difficult,
Teacher/ teaching: Modern+ Fun & Funny+ Friendly+ exciting/ energizing+ masters the topic (The teacher can turn an uninteresting content into fun)	**Lack of involvement** No participation+ pressure
Personal/ *Intrinsic* I'm a fan of British culture/ I like English, It 's my passion etc.	**Content:** Boring, not practical, not what I expected

Concerning the second research question about how and why students' interest in English as a major develops, the results indicate that the participants' level of interest in English as a major

has generally increased since they started university. The students were asked to give explanations why their interest has increased or has declined. The results show that those who stated that their interest has risen explained it mainly by the mastery of the language that they have gained through studying at university, the knowledge, the skills and the competences they have learnt from the subject, and finally the goals they have set for themselves and which they think will be achieved through studying English. However, an important number of students claimed that their interest in studying English as a major declined mainly due to increasing difficulty, lack of help and support and the mismatch between what they expected and what the courses offer. (See a list of all the factors in table 4)

Table 4: *Paired Samples Statistics for interest development*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair Interest level1	7,58	132	1,625	,141
Interest level 2	8,37	132	2,533	,221

To answer the last question, the students were asked to provide the grades of both the courses they were interested in and those they were not interested in. the findings show that there is a positive relationship between students' interest in a course and their achievement outcomes in that course. A paired samples t-test was conducted to measure the difference between the means for 'interesting courses' and the means for 'non-interesting courses'. The results indicate significant difference between the means of the courses the subjects were interested in (M=34.31, SD= 12.86) and those they were not interested in (M=24.25, SD= 11.84) conditions; t(131)= 16.34, p< .005 (See tables 5 & 6).

Table5: *Paired Samples Statistics for the relationship between interest levels and achievement outcomes*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair Low interest-grades	24.25 38	132	11.84932	1.03135
High interest-grades	34.31 06	132	12.86980	1.12017

Table6: *Paired Samples Correlations*

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair Interest/achievement	132	,840	,000

4. Discussion:

This study attempted to explain why students show interest or disinterest in university courses and to investigate the development of their level of interest in English as a university major. Besides, the researcher tried to measure the relationship between students' interest in courses and their performance. The results reported above show that situational factors like the characteristics of the content taught can play a major role in stimulating or inhibiting students' interest in a course. One of the most important features of interesting content reported by the participants was novelty and fostering competence. This corroborates findings from research carried out by Azevedo (2006) who found that the combination of novelty and competence triggered students' interest. Similarly, Turner & Silvia (2006) stated that novelty is a major feature of texts and tasks that generate interest within learners. The subjects of this study emphasized the importance of promoting creativity and critical thinking as central stimulants for interest in a course. In parallel with this, Chen & Darst (1999, 2001) found that situational interest can be increased by engaging students in content that challenges their thinking and enhances their learning. Harckiewicz et al. (2008) also suggested that mastery goals can trigger and develop interest. Besides, in their research on students 'perceptions of the importance, utility, and interest of the course material, Pintrich et al. found that there is a positive correlation between students' perception of task value and the cognitive engagement the course offers. Thus, it was found that students who engaged in critical thinking and cognitive strategy use reported higher levels of interest.

The findings for the first research question also confirm the premises of the self-determination theory laid down by Deci & Ryan (1985, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2002) suggested that human-beings have three psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. Activities that meet these needs are expected to stimulate high levels of engagement and interest. The participants stated that teachers who put less pressure on them and courses that develop their skills and knowledge are more interesting. In this vein, research in autonomy-supportive teaching behavior indicates that supportive teachers tend to listen more, exercise less pressure and support intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 2002).

Research carried by Eccles & Midgley (1989) on the quality of students' motivation showed that teachers who support learners' autonomy rather than control their behavior contribute enormously to students' achievement, conceptual learning and perseverance. Empirical research provides substantial evidence about how teachers' instruction affect students feeling of control and self-determination which in turn boosts their motivation to learn and perform better (Hamm & Reeve, 2002). Reeve (2002) stated that students feel increasingly competent when teachers provide them with opportunities to talk and work on problem-solving by themselves. This explains why the participants of this study attributed their disinterest to the fact that some teachers are talkative and do not give them opportunities to express their thoughts. Another interesting finding in this study suggests that students did not consider easy tasks to be interesting and they attributed their disinterest to the difficulty of the course. This result is in line with research on the level of difficulty and challenge that is appropriate to maintain students' attention and effort. Researchers suggest that optimal levels of difficulty should strike a balance between what students already know and what they need to acquire (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, 1978). Deci and Ryan (1985) also explained that in their pursuit of challenges, learners usually seek tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult.

The results for the second question shows that students' interest has increased since they chose English as a major. The reasons mentioned relate to students' mastery levels and acquired

skills. This supports some researchers' findings and thoughts about interest development. For instance, Alexander (1997, 2004) linked interest development to developing expertise. Besides, self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1994) suggests that one's belief in one's own ability to achieve a task successfully boosts confidence and triggers motivation to carry out that task. More importantly, Bandura believes that efficacious people love to set challenging goals and show strong commitment to these goals. However, researchers have also found that high levels of self-efficacy may have a counter-effect on students' interest. As Bandura (1997) suggests, "at least moderate perceived efficacy may be required to generate and sustain interest in an activity, but increases in perceived efficacy above the threshold level do not produce further gains in interest" (p. 220).

Students also ascribed their increasing levels of interest in learning English to the dynamic of the learning group, the status of English and the relevance of the major to their goals. Actually social factors such as peer influence are one of the most important factors that can provide a person with support and influence her/ his choice to pursue or give up interest in a task, major or vocation (Holland, 1997). Research has also shown that at early stages of interest, students need support that they can get both through self-regulated learning skills and from their social environment to sustain that interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). This explains the statements made by some participants who claimed that their interest has risen because "I met some classmates who made me enjoyed the studies". As it might be assumed that most students who choose English as major do that out of some interest in the English language that can be triggered by a myriad factors, this triggered interest need to be maintained by characteristics of the content of the courses and the environment (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

The findings for the third research question indicated that there is a positive relationship between students' interest in courses and their achievement outcomes. This is in line with research on the impact of interest on performance. There is substantial evidence that interest positively influences academic performance (Alexander,1997; Krapp, Renninger & Hidi, 1992; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Hoffmann, Krapp, Renninger, & Baumert, 1998). However, an important number of students reported having some very good grades in courses that they were not interested in. This may mean that these learners have developed some self-regulated learning skills that make them expend effort in subjects that are boring for them because they are aware that to achieve their goals they have to work hard in all courses. This was made clear in a statement of one of the participants who said "I'm here to learn not to have what I want, therefore, I have to work hard and like all the subjects". In this context, some researchers have suggested that some learners tend to use self-regulation skills to attain their goals (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). More interestingly, interest researchers have emphasized self-regulation as an indispensable factor for the development of individual interest.

The students who reported that their interest has waned imputed this decline to the boring courses and the uninteresting content. Others claimed that they felt that they had to do everything by themselves and that some of their professors were not supportive. While these factors can be interpreted by the underlying principles of the interest model developed by Renninger and Hidi (2006), other theories of motivation may provide some explanation. Students' interest has also been linked to factors described in causal attribution theories, especially Weiner's (1986) model of causal attributions. Weiner's locus of causality suggests that people who make external

attributions of failure are less likely to persist in a task or to expect success in future similar activities. This kind of perception is likely to turn off interest in the content or activities that made students experience failure.

Implications and Conclusion

The present research aimed at investigating how Moroccan EFL learners explain their interest in English as a major and the courses they are studying at university. Besides, it tried to measure the influence of this interest on their performance and to study how and why interest in English as a major develops. The mixed method design has revealed some interesting findings that will contribute to understanding the issue of academic interest in higher education in Morocco. Building on the results of this study, it can be concluded that research in academic interest has strong implications for both researchers and educators. The results indicate that interest is an important factor that needs to be explored. Furthermore, a number of variables and factors emerge from the elicited data and call for further investigations. For instance, there is need to investigate how interest in English as a major is triggered at first hand. This may provide us with insight about how it develops or declines subsequently. Besides, researchers may address the questions how variables like self-efficacy or self-regulation are associated with interest and why some students fail to develop maintained interest in advanced university levels.

Educators too can draw numerous implications from research in interest, In general, and this study, in particular. First, the findings give practitioners evidence that interest is not static. Rather, it can be developed and maintained through support, interesting content and competence building courses. The participants' accounts on topics that stimulate their interest can also give teachers a clear idea about the type of activities that can maintain learners' interest. Providing EFL students with opportunities to express themselves, to learn critical thinking skills and to feel that they are developing competence are central practices that can help them maintain interest in English studies. Furthermore, helping learners gain awareness about their interests and showing them how to connect their goals and learning to content teaching objectives can also sustain their interest in the major they have chosen and encourage them to persist. It is common that educators believe that students either have or do not have interest and that interst cannot be developed. The present study comes to provide more evidence that interest can be triggered and developed. Teachers and other social factors can play a central role in stimulating and sustaining students' interest by providing conducive factors and helping learners build connections to instructional objectives. At the end, it should be noted that the results of this study need to be interpreted with caution and within its methodological limits.

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