

Autonomous Learning and English Language Proficiency in a B.Ed. in Languages Program

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This paper reports on an ongoing research project on autonomous learning and English language proficiency being conducted in the B.Ed. in Languages Program in a Colombian private university. There were three phases in this study, observation, action and reflection. Preliminary findings in phase one identified the following traits: low proficiency in English, learners' dependency on teachers, and lack of resources for independent work. Based on these results an action plan was designed. Phase two consisted of the implementation of five stages of a model of autonomous learning. In the third phase it is expected that results will show the ways in which autonomy and language proficiency interact.

Key Words: autonomy, language learning, levels of control, proficiency, resources

El presente artículo describe una investigación en curso sobre aprendizaje autónomo y proficiencia en inglés desarrollado en un programa de Licenciatura en Idiomas de una universidad privada de Colombia. La investigación consta de tres fases: observación, acción y reflexión (investigación-acción). La información preliminar obtenida en la primera fase dio cuenta de tres características: bajo nivel de proficiencia, dependencia de los estudiantes hacia los docentes y falta de recursos para el trabajo independiente. Con base en estos resultados se diseñó un plan de acción. La segunda fase muestra la implementación de un modelo de trabajo autónomo. En la fase final se espera que los resultados del estudio muestren la relación entre el aprendizaje autónomo y el grado de proficiencia de los estudiantes en el idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: autonomía, aprendizaje de una lengua, niveles de control, proficiencia, recursos

Rationale

The current changes in secondary and higher education in Colombia such as the demand for quality standards, accountability of programs, use of standardized tests for teachers and learners, and use of a credit system, among others, require institutions to conduct research that may transform the curricula and the administration of programs.

In the language-learning process it is important not only to know the contents but actually to use them in the appropriate contexts and situations of speech. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize both competences development and language study in order to help learners develop habits such as learning to learn by themselves, goal-setting and time management, among others. That is why we consider that doing research on autonomy becomes relevant for our setting.

Introduction

This paper reports on the preliminary results of the research project “AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND PROFICIENCY IN A TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM” being carried out at a private university in Bogotá. The main objective of this research project is to inquire about the incidence of autonomous learning strategies for EFL proficiency in a group of student-teachers. The research method used to achieve this aim is action research which followed three phases: observation, action and reflection. In the first phase, preliminary data was gathered by using the standardized test “Quick Placement Test” (Oxford University Press). A survey to build the learners’ profile was also applied. Learners were asked about their goals, how they communicate in the English language, past experiences related to learning English, learning styles and strategies, and about the use of media to practice the target language. The analysis of the test results and of the surveys allowed an identification of the problem. At the same time, the theoretical framework was outlined.

In the second phase (action), autonomous learning strategies were adapted. At the moment of writing this paper, learners had been working with the teacher’s guidance on some of them. The worksheets comprising the five levels of the model of autonomy proposed by Nunan (1997) consisting of *awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence* were implemented

The third phase (reflection) will be carried out later. Researchers will continue with the implementation of the model. Afterwards, results will be analyzed to determine if there was influence of autonomous learning strategies regarding the EFL proficiency in a group of student-teachers. If so, transformation of the

pedagogical processes from a dependent to an independent stage throughout autonomy development can be recommended for our context.

Research objectives

General objective

To inquire as to the influence of autonomous learning strategies regarding efl proficiency.

Specific objectives

- To measure the student-teachers' English proficiency
- To inquire into the learners' level of autonomy in their English learning process
 - To explore how flexible it is to lead students from dependence to independence in learning a language throughout the application of autonomous learning strategies
 - To measure possible changes in learners' proficiency after the implementation of a model
 - To analyze the pedagogical implications of the model

Setting and population

The participants belong to an undergraduate English program at a private Colombian university. Two groups were considered for the study. One of 30 students registered in "English Intermediate II"; and another of 27 registered in "English Advanced II". Ages ranged from 17 to 30. Learners come from the lower middle class; many studied in public schools and their parents are white-collar workers.

Literature review

The literature review will cover the following areas: definitions of autonomy and levels of control; approaches to fostering autonomy, measures of proficiency used in the study; and a model of implementation of autonomy in a language program for learner training Nunan (1997, p.195) and MacLagan's proposal (1992, p.77-84) for autonomy in a language department. For measuring foreign language proficiency, the yardstick proposed in the Common European Framework was also considered.

Definitions

The concept of autonomy has become part of the mainstream of research and practice within the field of language education. Holec (1981) and Little (1990)

argue that autonomy is not a single, easily describable behaviour. For these authors, autonomy is defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning. Benson (2001), on the other hand, states that autonomy is the natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning.

Holec's and Little's definitions cover two aspects of the nature of autonomy as an individual capacity, but both tend to underplay a third vital element in autonomous learning: that the content of learning should be freely determined by the learners. For Benson (1996), control over learning necessarily involves actions that have social consequences. For those reasons, it should be emphasised that any definition of autonomy that attempts to cover every potential aspect of control over learning risks becoming too long for practical use. Indeed, the researchers reporting in this paper feel that it is best to adhere to a definition of autonomy which considers the capacity to take control of one's learning. It can be argued that a description of autonomy in language learning should at least recognise the importance of the following three levels at which learner control may be exercised: *control over learning management; control over cognitive processes and control over learning content*. These terms will be explained below.

Control over *learning management* can be described in terms of behaviours that learners employ in order to manage the planning, organisation and evaluation of their learning. In the context of language learning, Breen and Mann (1997, p.134-6) suggest that autonomous learners

- see their relationship as what is to be learned, how it will be learned and to the resources available as those in which they are in charge or in control;
- are in an authentic relationship to the language they are learning and have a genuine desire to learn that particular language;
- have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or assumed negative assessments of themselves or their work;
- are able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what they need to do and experience next;
- are alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful and opportunistic way;
- have a capacity to learn that is independent of the educational processes in which they are engaged;
- are able to make use of the environment they find themselves in strategically;
- are able to negotiate between the strategic meeting of their own needs and responding to the needs and desires of other group members.

One observation that can be made about this list is that this does not simply describe observable learning behaviours. Often the capacities described go beyond learning management and are concerned with factors of personality and attitude. At the same time, these factors are often described in such a way that the autonomous learner appears to be a particular kind of person rather than a person who possesses particular skills that can be acquired.

Control over *cognitive process* is understood as a matter of the psychology of learning rather than directly observable learning behaviours, although it will generally be inferred from the observation of these behaviours. This type of control is also concerned with general attitudes towards learning than with particular mental processes. Benson (2001) argues that it may be possible to describe control over the *cognitive processes* involved in language learning in terms of the following three areas of research that currently hold most promises in this regard: attention, reflection and metacognitive knowledge.

Control over *learning content* is an aspect of self-management which, like other aspects of learning, has its basis in control over *cognitive processes*. There is a good reason to believe that control over *content* is fundamental to autonomy: If learners are self managing methodological aspects of the learning process, but not learning what they want to learn, their learning may not be authentically self-directed; also, in institutional contexts, learner control of *content* has social and political dimensions. In short, the learners may learn how to exercise control over the collective situation of their learning by using capacities for social interaction that are distinct from those required in the management of individual learning.

Fostering Autonomy

Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it, given appropriate conditions and preparation. The conditions for the development of autonomy include the opportunity to exercise control over learning. The ways in which we organize the practice of teaching and learning, therefore, have an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners. Castillo (2004) discusses the teacher's role in promoting those modes. On the other hand, Benson (2001) argues that teachers and educational institutions should attempt to foster autonomy through practices that allow learners to engage in modes of learning in which this capacity can be developed. Because the capacity for *control over learning* has various aspects, autonomy may take various forms.

Fostering autonomy does not, therefore, imply any particular approach to practice. In principle, any practice that encourages and enables learners to take

greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered a means of promoting autonomy. In the field of foreign language education, however, autonomy has come to be closely identified with practices that foster autonomy and that can be grouped in the following six broad headings (Benson 2001:109):

- *Resource-based approaches*: emphasise independent interaction with learning materials.
- *Technology-based approaches*: emphasise independent interaction with educational technologies.
- *Learner-based approaches* emphasise the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner.
- *Classroom-based approaches*: emphasise learning control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning.
- *Curriculum-based approaches*: extend the idea of learner control to the curriculum as a whole.
- *Teacher-based approaches*: emphasise the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners.

The distinctions made in this classification are largely a matter of focus. In practice, approaches are often combined, sometimes in eclectic ways. Although claims are often made for the particular effectiveness of one approach over others, most researchers and practitioners would accept that they are interdependent.

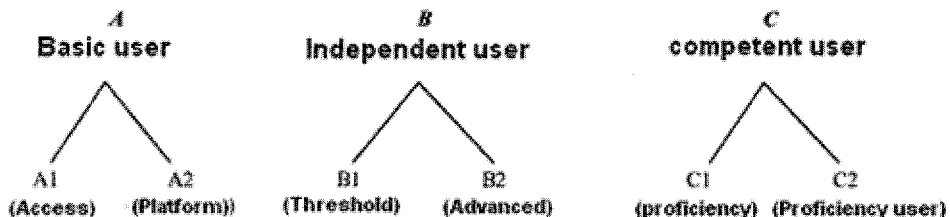
After reviewing these issues, the authors see the opportunity to contribute to the knowledge regarding autonomy. Then, we would like to establish the possible relationship between the development of autonomous learning strategies and the development of English proficiency. The use of the model attempts to help students move from dependence to independence through different levels such as awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence, in which they could be the leaders of their own learning process.

Measuring English Proficiency

The standardized Quick Placement Test (2004) was used for measuring the English language proficiency of the learners participating in the study. The Research Group considered that the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) Council of Europe (2001) used in this battery would help the community to understand the levels proposed by the QPT. As it is known, the CEF describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to

learn to do in order to use a language for communication and the knowledge and skills they have to develop to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set.

The CEF also defines levels of proficiency, which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. In the CEF yardstick each level can be subdivided into lower levels as follows:



The global scale and its detailed descriptors can be consulted in Council of Europe (2001).

A model of implementation of autonomy in a language program

The authors considered useful the model proposed by Nunan (1997) that includes the following five levels of implementation and contributes to a model of autonomy: *awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence*. This Autonomous Learning Program puts this range of independence into practice in the following ways:

Model of autonomy: levels of implementation

Level	Learner Action	Content	Process	Strategies and resources	Levels of control
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and contents of the materials they are using	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies	Identifying students' awareness "Becoming an autonomous learner" Worksheet (1st) Identifying students' learning styles "Multiple Intelligences, what's my style" worksheet (2nd & 3rd) Planning student's learning process Worksheet (4th) Making the most of your language learning. Worksheet (5th)	<i>control over cognitive processes</i> <i>control over cognitive processes & management</i>
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer	Learners make choices among a range of options	Learning about self-assessment of continuing language development. Worksheet (6th) Finding Self-access activities worksheet(7th) Prioritizing language needs. Worksheet (8th)	<i>control over learning management</i>
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and contents of the learning program	Learners modify / adapt tasks	Planning a learner contract. Worksheet (9th) Showing evidence of autonomous learning tasks. Collection of tasks by means of a portfolio. Worksheet (10th)	<i>control over learning management</i>
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives	Learners create their own tasks	Application of reading strategies. Newspapers, novels, articles, stories, magazine; authentic material. Application of listening strategies. Watching TV, listening for different purposes, radio, student-created song listening library	<i>control over learning content</i>
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond	Learners become teachers and researchers	Using hypermedia to prepare lessons plans. Computers Writing instructions and processes. English software Seminar Skills (preparing a short talk). Preparing an interview with a native speaker Video Beam tapes and videos Applications of oral skills Listening to a lecture. and report it Modelling Native English speakers Writing formal papers. Guidelines for writing essays.	<i>control over learning content</i>

Adapted from Nunan, D. (1997:195) model autonomy: levels of implementation

The column of strategies and resources (Gardner and Miller, 1996) has been added by the authors in order to contribute to the action plan that is being carried out at the University where we work.

Research design

Statement of the problem

Students' competence in the English language, identified by means of the application of the QPT, is well below the expected level for a professional in English teaching. Also, certain attitudes of the learners regarding learning management, motivation, awareness and self-assessment seem to interfere with their learning process according to the applied surveys.

Research questions

Main question

To what extent may the development of autonomous learning strategies influence English student-teachers' proficiency level?

Secondary questions

1. How does the development of autonomous learning strategies influence control over learning management, control over cognitive processes and control over content?
2. How can a teacher education program promote autonomous learning in undergraduate students?

Research methodology

The authors followed action research, which according to Wallace (1998) is the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some area of professional practice. We considered it the most accessible form of research for it allowed us to propose a solution to the problems encountered in our practice. We felt action research also suited this because it is, in effect, autonomous learning and was identified as a trait that can make a difference in class.

Research Procedure

The following steps were followed:

- The Quick Placement Test was applied.
- A preliminary survey was applied to teachers and students from the two classes observed.

- In the instructional design, learners focused on language learning strategies. They used worksheets.

- Identification of the steps followed by the learners' actions in the "awareness" and "involvement levels" of the model used.

-Identification of the steps followed by the learners' actions in the "intervention" "creation" and "transcendence" levels of the model used.

-Data gathering and data analysis

Preliminary data analysis

The results of the QPT proficiency test are presented in the chart below. The words 'intermediate' and 'advanced' correspond to the names given to the courses.

LEVEL	Intermediate class	Advanced class
A1	5	4
A2	15	18
B1	9	4
B2	1	1
TOTAL	30	27

The QPT results indicated that

1. Most of the 'advanced' students placed at the same level as the 'intermediate' students.

2. Nine out of thirty 'intermediates' placed in B1 while four out of twenty seven 'advanced' placed in B1.

3. There are two students who achieved B2 (independent user) regardless of the class they were registered in.

On the other hand, surveys (see Annex) were applied to teachers and students. The data obtained showed the experiences, attitudes and expectations that students and teachers had regarding autonomy in the English teaching –learning process. Also, the open questions of the survey were analyzed and these results suggest that

- There is a dependence of learners on professors. Learners consider class topics and activities have to be explained and developed entirely by professors.
- Learners perceive that professors do not encourage autonomous learning.
- There is little dialogue between professors and students regarding learning and assessment.

- There is little negotiation of the syllabus between professors and students.
- Learners and professors are aware of the lack of critical reflection regarding the curriculum objectives, the methodology and the contents.
- There is abundant evidence of students' preferences in learning styles and strategies regarding the English learning process.
- Both professors and learners are interested in increasing the English proficiency level of the program.
- There is little use of L2 out of the classroom, although students report that they work on their own.
- Learners and professors express the need for a resource centre.
- Learners and professors express the need for a space for tutoring
- The two learners who achieved B2 in the QPT had studied English in other institutions, are self-taught and work as English teachers.

Implementation and analysis

Since students' willingness to become more autonomous was fundamental for the project in order to guarantee good results, on the first day of class, students were asked about their interest in participating in the project and were given an explanation on what it was about. They signed a consent form and a contract to assure their participation. Some actions were carried out from the very beginning of the course, taking into consideration the five levels that contribute to a model of autonomy: *awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence*. For a semester, the first two levels of the model were implemented.

AWARENESS includes the following four autonomous learning strategies: *Identifying students' awareness, Identifying students learning styles, Planning students' learning process and Making the most of language learning*, which were taken as the basic structure for the instructional design to follow in the first level. Clearly, the strategy list could provide months of potential practice, but in our case, time restricted our program of activities to five sessions. To remain as learner-centred as possible, teachers negotiated with the students the strategies they wanted to work more on.

Each strategy had a specific purpose and was followed in a logical sequence. The first strategy was to identify students' awareness of the importance of self-assessing linguistic and attitudinal aspects in the learning process. This was done through a discussion that was guided by a worksheet containing some questions such as "Think about the last time you learnt to do something by yourself. What was it? Now think about how you worked. Why did you approach it that way?"

Students' opinions about learning by themselves were very positive. They said that this strategy helped them reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, but that this required commitment, preparation and honesty on the part of students. They also commented on how they had learnt by means of following instructions, working cooperatively, observing, etc. Finally, most students realized they had used autonomous strategies unconsciously and they preferred to learn by doing.

The second and third strategies were to identify students' multiple intelligences and learning styles. In order to accomplish this, a questionnaire was answered, ranking from 1 to 5 each type of multiple intelligences. It was noticed that students' multiple intelligences are almost at the same level of development. The highest levels were in the musical, intrapersonal, spatial and naturalistic area so that their tendency is to work or study fields related to arts in which they can express their creativity and thoughts. The results also showed that the lowest score was in the emotional and logical-mathematical activities; from this, it can be drawn that they do not like to show their feelings and do not like to be reflective. Finally, it can be said that students can work by themselves on different tasks without any difficulty. Students were also given a worksheet with learning strategies for all the skills and secondary skills of the language to recognize the ones that were helping them and the ones that were totally unknown to them. After analyzing their strategies, styles and modes of learning, they were told to work on two tasks for the following session in order to plan their language learning process. The results showed that only few students see themselves as good communicators or enjoy interacting with people and using the language they have learned in a natural way. Others enjoy learning English in class and like the teacher leading them through the learning of the language. The majority enjoys learning English by example and is aware of the importance of acquiring the language.

The fourth strategy was to plan students' learning. To further develop the idea of students planning their own learning, they were given a worksheet containing twelve questions to be answered. After analyzing the answers, they concluded that many self-access learners encounter problems because they fail to realize the limitations of managing time. Although for them it is difficult to set goals, they take into account different resources such as the internet to learn outside class. Most of them think they do not have a good English level but they are really interested in improving it by exploring new ways of learning by themselves or asking other people. This task made learners aware of their limitations and helped them to plan their learning for the rest of the semester so that they could see the progress every time they self-assessed their work. They were told about how

important it was for them to start working on the planning of their learning in order to have good results at the end of the course

The fifth strategy was to organize learning to achieve realistic goals. It led students to a reflection on how they develop important characteristics in order to be autonomous such as faith, motivation, awareness, time management, setting goals, determination, support, enjoyment and records. The analysis of the answers shows that most of the students are good at reading in English but they feel they have to improve their listening skills. On the other hand, they acknowledged that the best time for them to learn is in the morning. Most of them could not specify how long they used English weekly. This can indicate that they are still not completely aware of the importance of using English as much as possible to progress. When asked about setting realistic goals, students answered they would like to develop communicative strategies and, in this process, they would like to be supported by the internet and their friends since some of the learners do not know who can help them. Finally, it was noticed that students are aware of what they need to improve but are not sure how to go about it. Therefore, it is necessary to lead them through this process.

INVOLVEMENT: After consolidating the strategy training in the first level, teacher-researchers ensured that students were aware of the strategies available to them and the situations in which they could be used. Three more worksheets were applied in the second level. They focused on the following strategies: *Learning about self-assessment of continuing language development, Finding self-access activities, and Prioritizing language needs.*

The objective of the sixth strategy was to help students identify their mistakes and look for strategies to avoid them. Students considered their most common mistakes to be in pronunciation and speaking. To improve, they suggested working harder, being autonomous and practicing English frequently.

The seventh strategy applied was to find the activities the students are able to do to improve their English without a teacher and also to identify the things they want to do but are not able to do by themselves. They were given a list of twelve items that helped learners to keep a record of their autonomous learning. It can be concluded, through the analysis of students' answers, that they are able to work by themselves on reviewing work done in class, borrowing English materials, watching films with caption in Spanish, listening to music, and reading books. There are some activities they want to do but are still not able to without the teacher's guidance such as watching films with caption in English, reading books in the original version, reading newspapers or magazines in English, talking to native speakers, doing

exercises and activities with an answer key, going to a book shop to look for books in English and finding friends who want to practice. So far in the process it has been noticed that half of the learners has gained some level of autonomy since they already do activities by themselves and the other half reports that they are interested in carrying them out.

The eighth strategy was to prioritize language needs. For doing this, learners were given a list of language skills in order to choose the ones they feel they need most at present or that they will need in the future. Some learners were not able to find skills they actually needed and found consultants' advice useful.

The abilities they checked are as follows: In reading, most learners feel they need more commitment. The level of proficiency for reading was identified as low-intermediate. Actions plans deserve special attention to achieve a higher level, not only for their own interest as learners but also for the monitoring sessions that will be assessed by the teachers-researchers who lead this project.

With respect to writing, learners mentioned that what they do now is related to expected use in the future. They stated they will use writing for academic articles, essays, diaries, formal letters, proposals or reports.

Learners considered that they had intermediate listening skills and, for them, speaking seemed to be a very poorly-developed skill. Learners argued they still did not feel confident when speaking to others. They felt that listening and speaking are important for future teachers. Grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary are secondary skills in which learners manifested high interest.

Next semester, the levels of intervention, creation and transcendence of the model will be developed. The instructional design will continue with the collection of portfolios and worksheets. Researchers will have data on learners' difficulties, commitments and action plans. We will be looking for evidence of the effect of the innovation on proficiency.

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Annex

Universidad (.....)
 Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación
 Centro de Investigaciones
 Línea de Investigación en Pedagogía y Didáctica

The following survey aims to inquire on the experiences, attitudes and expectations that you have had as a student or teacher of the Program: B. Ed. in Languages at Universidad Libre.

A. Read carefully the statements and check the option that corresponds to your own criteria

	Always	Sometimes	Never
1. Do English teachers give explanations of each one of the topics in the class?			
2. In English classes, should students infer rules and/or meanings of words or expressions by themselves?			
3. Do English teachers assign work by pairs or in groups?			
4. Do students prefer for English teachers to give explanations of the topics?			
5. Do teachers generally stay up in front of the class when they are teaching?			
6. Do English teachers use more Spanish than English in the classes?			
7. Do teachers assign work that requires you to speak or write about yourself?			
8. Do students get a bad grade if they don't develop the assigned work?			
9. Have the students corrected the work of some of their partners at least once?			
10. Do English teachers ask for opinions on how students like to learn and the way of developing their classes?			
11. Do English teachers provide materials for the class different from the textbooks?			
12. Do teachers make students aware of their mistakes and correct them. How? _____			
13. Do teachers propose specific situations in which students have to develop the four abilities?			
14. Do students usually read materials in English that are not related to the class?			
15. Do students usually look for native speakers whom they can speak to?			

16. Do students usually listen to the radio and television in English?			
17. At home, do students usually develop not only academic but other type activities in English?			
18. Do students speak English with their partners outside class?			
19. Do students develop practical activities taking into account their teacher's feedback?			
20. Are the activities carried out at the English class enough to reach a good professional development with respect to the level students are in?			
21. To the assigned works I dedicate only the necessary time.			
22. I consult on topics in English that others may ignore.			

B. Please, answer the following.

1. What I like the most about my English teaching-learning process is...

2. What I have liked the least about my teaching-learning process is...

3. I consider that it is important to have a resource centre in the department where learners and teachers have access to videos, books, audiocassettes, software, Internet and didactic material in general for...

C. CHECK THE ITEMS YOU AGREE WITH.

1. According to the level of the course I am taking at this moment, my proficiency in the foreign language is:

a- Excellent _____

b - Good _____

c - Fair _____

d - Bad _____

Other _____: _____