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Promotion of Learner Autonomy in a Freshmen's English Course at a Colombian University[1]

Promoción de la Autonomía del Aprendiz en un Curso de Inglés para Estudiantes de Primer Año en una Universidad Colombiana.

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an Action-Research cycle conducted at Universidad del Valle, which aimed at fostering learner autonomy in freshmen from a foreign languages program, within an English course. The study established the freshmen's entrance profile regarding learner autonomy, and implemented a course based on the development of autonomous behaviors. Finally, an exit profile was established to measure the impact of the intervention. The results show significant progress in the development of some behaviors and suggest that this type of initiatives need to be planned in a long-term basis.

Key words: Independent learning, learner autonomy, learning strategies, self-access centers, autonomous behaviors.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un ciclo de Investigación-Acción llevada a cabo en la Universidad del Valle, cuyo objetivo fue fomentar la

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autonomía en estudiantes de primer semestre de lenguas extranjeras, en un curso de inglés. El estudio estableció el perfil de entrada de los estudiantes en cuanto a su autonomía como aprendices, y se implementó un curso basado en el desarrollo de comportamientos autónomos. Finalmente se estableció el perfil de salida para medir el impacto de la intervención. Los resultados muestran un progreso significativo en el desarrollo de algunos de estos comportamientos y sugieren que estas propuestas deben ser planificadas a largo plazo.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje independiente, autonomía del aprendiz, estrategias de aprendizaje, centros de auto acceso, comportamientos autónomos.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um ciclo de Pesquisa-Ação realizada na Universidade do Valle, cujo objetivo foi fomentar a autonomia em estudantes de primeiro semestre de línguas estrangeiras, em um curso de inglês. O estudo estabeleceu o perfil de entrada dos estudantes em relação a sua autonomia como aprendizes, e foi implementado um curso baseado no desenvolvimento de comportamentos autónomos. Finalmente, se estabeleceu o perfil de saída para medir o impacto da intervenção. Os resultados mostram um progresso significativo no desenvolvimento de alguns destes comportamentos e sugerem que estas propostas devem ser planejadas ao longo prazo.

Palavras chave: aprendizagem independente, autonomia do aprendiz, estratégias de aprendizagem, centros de auto acesso, comportamentos autônomos.

Introduction

The development of learner autonomy constitutes a powerful tool to overcome social, cultural and institutional constraints that might interfere in the learning process (Benson & Voller, 1997; Abril, 2014). An autonomous learner exerts total control over what, how and when he wants to learn, and therefore will manage to surpass any obstacle that prevents him from reaching his goals. In the field of language learning, autonomy becomes doubly important, as you need to be an independent learner as well as an independent user of the language (Pennycook, 1997). On these grounds, the concept of autonomy has become a major topic in Applied Linguistics research, as societies and institutions have embraced it as an important and desired educational goal (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997; Sinclair, 2000; Paiva & Braga, 2008). Such is the case of *Universidad del Valle*, and more particularly of its School of Language Sciences, where the desire for autonomy is formally stated in the different official documents from the program curriculum, as well as in the institutional PEI[3].

Bearing this in mind, a research was conducted through the design of two basic English courses, based on the promotion and development of autonomy, for the Foreign Languages Program, as well as the implementation and evaluation of the first course. The research had a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to give projection to previous local studies (Hernández & Quesada, 1999; Cárdenas et al., 2001, Cárdenas, 2006; Areiza, 2010), around the concept of autonomy from a theoretical perspective, and materialize an applicable didactic proposal; and on the other hand, to fulfill the need to form autonomous learners, as evidenced in various studies (Gómez & Hurtado, 2012; González, 2012; Gómez, G., 2012), also local, carried out under the Self-evaluation process for the accreditation of the program.

Throughout this paper, I intend to present a snapshot of the research design and the results eventually obtained. But beyond that, I put forward a frank reflection on some aspects, difficulties, and challenges to consider when it comes to transforming behaviors and motivate students to become autonomous subjects, hoping that this experience may serve as a tool to language teachers interested in such intricate task.

[3] Spanish acronym for: Institution's Educational Project

Theoretical Framework

Autonomy and its Importance in Language Learning

Although the concept of autonomy is difficult to be encompassed in a short definition, several authors agree that, in general terms, autonomy in learning refers to the learner's possibility of managing and making decisions about his/her own learning process (Benson & Voller, 1997; Dam, 1995; Sinclair, 2000). The prominence given to autonomy in the field of foreign language education goes hand in hand with the rise of the communicative approach. This latter implies a change in the roles of the teacher and the students, as well as a new conception of the language and, therefore, a new understanding of the way to teach it and learn it. On this grounds, Paiva & Braga (2008) state that "in the seventies, with the emergence of a new concept of language – language as communication – and the emphasis on the cognitive processes, autonomy appeared as a central feature in FL teaching" (p. 442). The importance of autonomy lies in the fact that it equips the student to overcome obstacles of different nature that may rise between him and his learning goals. In language learning specifically, learner autonomy is especially important given that the learner of a language needs to develop autonomy to learn and autonomy to use the language (Pennycook, 1997).

Learner Training for the Development of Autonomy

For the purposes of this study, learner training was deemed a paramount element in the promotion of learner autonomy: in order for a student to become autonomous, he/she needs to be equipped, through training, to cope with a new vision of learning. There have been, however, dissenters to the view that a learner should be taught how to become autonomous, as the idea of receiving any sort of training can be understood as an automatized behavior and, therefore, an antonym of autonomy. Holec (1980), for instance, lies at the heart of the discussion by claiming that "the basic methodology for learner training should be that of discovery […] By proceeding largely by trial and error he trains himself progressively" (p.42).

As a rebuttal to this, authors like Dickinson (1992) and Esch (1997) argue convincingly that learner training can be explicitly carried out at initial stages of the learning process, and that such process does not refrain independent learning. On the contrary, learner training empowers the students with learning strategies and metacognitive tools that may boost motivation and independence towards learning.

To portray this issue in Sturtridge's terms (1997): "those who have received learner training will have already been made aware of the need to be aware of their own goals, to be able to monitor their own progress and evaluate their own performance" (p. 76).

Along similar lines, Hernández (2016) puts forward the argument that language learners in a Foreign Language Major must be explicitly trained into the use of learning strategies at an early stage of the process. For this author, an explicit training "informs the students about their possibilities for learning, generates motivation and desire to change the way they approach new knowledge, and improves their time Finally, besides learning strategies, this type of training needs to incorporate reflection workshops on why autonomy is important in language learning, how to work in self-access centers and how languages are learned (Ramírez, 2015; Esch, 1997), all in all, "we do not expect a carpenter to learn to handle the tools of his trade, but to learn nothing of the properties of the wood" (Sturtridge, 1997, p.78).

Autonomy and Self Access Centers

The use of self-access centers for the development of learner autonomy has been present for four decades now, with overwhelming evidence of their efficacy in catering to different learners' needs, which has made them grow in popularity in different countries. Reinders & Lázaro (2008), for instance, report a study of 46 self-access centers in five countries, where these facilities are perceived as "a time-, and cost-effective approach to learning a second language, or that it has additional benefits to learning not offered by other types of learning environments" (p. 56).

Self-access centers can be defined as the facilities where appropriate resources are provided to learners, on behalf of an institution, to foster the development of autonomous behaviors (Sheerin, 1997). In fact, such centers are an effective strategy, in Cotterall's (2008) words to "pay more attention to individual learners, and their unique motivations, experiences, and stories. An autonomy-fostering approach to language learning is therefore likely to focus first on individual learners' psychological relation to the language learning process, and only then on the strategies they adopt" (p.119).

Although self-access centers can be the result of evaluating and adapting previous facilities with new purposes and goals, these centers must go beyond a mere collection of books, computers, CD's and/or software; they have to be a space where all resources are closely

related to the activities, objectives and methodologies promoted in the classroom, so that learners find room for the independent practice of languages, by means of materials they feel familiar with.

According to Sturtridge (1997), the provision of a successful self-access center implies the training and development of both the faculty and the learners. Teachers from a given institution need to be trained in how to establish the link between the center and their courses, so that the center does not turn into a mere extension of the classroom, where learners' activities continue to be controlled (Trim, 1977). Equally important, teachers need to be trained in the design of proper materials for self-access learning, as the meaningfulness of the materials and resources found in the center will determine the acceptance or rejection on the part of the students. Furthermore, students need to be trained in how to make use of the center, how to choose suitable material, and how to select activities that are not too challenging that they may feel frustrated, or too easy as to not to make any progress at all. In other words, the teacher and the students must undergo substantial changes in the roles they have been traditionally assigned in education (Voller, 1997).

The Promotion of Learner Autonomy through Syllabus Design

Often, research in autonomy proposes rich theoretical discussions. However, when it comes to intervention issues, the promotion and development of learner autonomy can be a challenge for many teachers who are looking for a practical model to incorporate concrete actions into their course designs, as stated by Barbara (2007) and Ramírez (2015).

In this regard, Cotterall (1995, 2000) develops a solid proposal on the elements that must be intertwined in a syllabus design. The author starts from the premise that autonomy cannot be "clipped on to existing learning programs" (Cotterall, 1995, p.220) but must imply a totally new design, which must also be embraced as an institutional initiative. In this regard, Hammond & Collins (1991) argue that if a proposal based on the development of autonomy " is not institutionalized but merely tolerated as a minor aberration, it is unlikely to be taken seriously by learners or faculty, and may well fail completely" (p. 208).

Thus, Cotterall (1995, 2000) proposes a series of elements and principles (shown in italics) to take into account in a syllabus design. First, the author proposes that the course provide the opportunity to *negotiate course goals with students*, while encouraging them to set

short- and long-term objectives at all times. *A training in learning strategies* ensures that students have the necessary tools to undertake the course successfully (Sturtridge, 1997; Cotterall, 1995, 2000, Hernández, 2016). The course should also offer a specific space for the *learner/teacher dialogue*, which is a context of tutoring, feedback and constant reflection on learning in general, and learning a language in particular. Also, the syllabus should integrate *the use of tasks and the design of materials*, by the teacher and the students, who have free access to intervene in the class and propose themselves as leaders of a particular activity. Finally, the students are encouraged to write a *student record booklet*, or journal, in which they record their experiences and can keep track of personal progress. Building on these theoretical grounds, Ramírez (2015) proposes some practical guidelines to incorporate Cotterall's elements and principles (1995, 2000) into a concrete syllabus design.

Methodology

Type of study

This research featured a descriptive-interpretive nature in its initial phases, and a propositional phase that led into an intervention. Analysis of data corresponds to a qualitative method, as the study was framed in a cycle of Action-Research, whose essential purpose is to guide decision-making and change processes that favor the improvement of educational practices (Sandín, 2003). Researchers such as Cárdenas (2006) and Fandiño (2008) emphasize the relation between action research and the development of autonomy because the former leads into didactic approaches that actively involve both students and teachers in learning experiences.

Context and Participants

The study was carried out with 20 first-semester students enrolled in the Foreign Languages (English-French) Program from *Escuela de Ciencias del Lenguaje, Universidad del Valle (ECLUV)*, in Cali, Colombia. All the students involved in the research process were between the ages of 16 and 18. Most of them finished their high school in public schools in the city of Cali, except for four students who graduated from private non-bilingual institutions.

Research Stages and Data Collection Instruments

The Action-Research cycle comprised three stages. The first stage, or Diagnosis, started with a 1-year monitoring of two self-access centers (Resource Center and Computer Room) and the opportunities for the development of the autonomy offered by the institution. The objective was to determine if these centers actually played any role in the promotion of autonomy on behalf of the institution, and if there was relationship between these spaces and the syllabi designed by seven (7) professors who were traditionally in charge of first semester English courses. Accordingly, English syllabi were analyzed and first semester teachers were surveyed to determine if autonomy was explicitly promoted and set as a course objective. Finally, once the group of freshmen was enrolled for their first English course, they were inquired about their self-perceptions regarding their degree of autonomy and the autonomous learning behaviors they brought from their previous learning experiences, which led to the constitution of an initial autonomy profiles. Data collection instruments in this phase included the self-access centers' registration forms, one teachers' survey and documentary study of the English courses' syllabi, and one students' survey to establish the initial profile.

The second stage, also called *Design and Implementation*, encompassed the creation and execution of an English syllabus that was carefully tailored to fit the purpose of fostering learner autonomy. This syllabus design, which I report thoroughly in Ramírez (2015), accounts for a practical model in which the principles proposed by Cotterall (1995, 2000) and the methodology of task-based learning approach are interwoven into a didactic proposal for the development of learner autonomy. In a nutshell, and besides the conventional course contents, the syllabus also comprised a training program on learning strategies, specific individual and group sessions for teacher/student dialogue throughout the course, the design and implementation of tasks and learning materials by both the teacher and the students, the design of activities and materials for the self-access centers, and a series of supplementary talks that provided constant reflection feedback on autonomy-related themes. It should be noted that the integration of a Task-Based approach was paramount, since tasks encourage students to set their own goals and foster constant processes of dialogue, active participation, self-monitoring, and reflection upon feedback (Ramírez, 2015). Throughout this stage, data were collected from a teacher's diary, students' diaries and classroom observation forms.

Finally, the *Evaluation* stage aimed at assessing the effects of the endeavor at the end of the first semester. To that end, all students

were surveyed once again with the same instrument used in the first stage, in order to come up with an exit profile. The contrast of the freshmen's initial and exit profiles evinced the impact of the course in the acquisition or improvement of autonomous behaviors, learning strategies, and new study habits towards language learning. Moreover, half of the group of freshmen participated in a focus group, in which they evaluated the experience and provided feedback for further syllabi design. Students' perceptions collected in the survey and focus group were triangulated with the teacher's journal.

Results

Self-Access Centers, English Course Syllabi, and the Institutional Promotion of Autonomy

The data yielded in the *Diagnosis Stage* the lack of an actual promotion of learner autonomy in the institutional context. During the year prior to the arrival of the freshmen, the monitoring of the self-access centers revealed that these spaces were being underutilized and did not fulfill their purpose. The former foreign languages students were submerged in a sort of institutional culture of little use of the Centers. In addition, a closer look at the behaviors of the few Center visitors showed that these spaces were used mostly for leisure and relaxation rather than for learning activities and language practices.

Most English teachers also showed very little or no participation whatsoever towards the use of the self-access centers. All of them admitted ignoring the opportunities offered by the centers for the development of autonomy and recognized that they did not establish a link between these spaces and their course designs. In general, all of them expressed not knowing how to equip students to take full advantage of the materials and resources offered in self-access centers. Two of the surveyed teachers claimed to have visited the center with their class, however the Center's registration form indicated that the teachers conducted a regular class under their total domain of class topics and activities, and in which there was no evidence of self-access activities on behalf of the students. In other words, these two teachers used the facilities of the Centers as a mere classroom swap, but failed to understand the nature of the self-access center, institutionally conceived as a venue for students to make decisions in favor of their independent practice of the language. As a result, none of the centers has material designed by the teachers themselves or specific activities that enhance the independent practice of languages.

Although autonomy is established as a desire and purpose of the institution according to its governing documents, the analysis of 14 English syllabi revealed the lack of direct relation to the concept of autonomy; only 2 out of 14 syllabi mentioned autonomy, although none of the course objectives actually aimed at it. Moreover, the syllabi's structure features the kind of mainstream course where setting goals, establishing content and choosing an evaluation system is under the exclusive domain of the teacher with no say from his/her students.

On the basis of this evidence, one can put forward the claim that it is not possible to successfully implement a proposal for the development of autonomy if there is no institutional culture that supports such an endeavor, which must be solidly built on its teachers, curricula and resources. On these grounds, the new syllabus design and course implementation took into account the above-mentioned shortcomings, in order to provide an environment that is conducive to the development of learner autonomy.

Autonomy Profiles Before and After the Course Implementation

Before starting the course, all freshmen were given a survey that inquired about the presence of 30 autonomous behaviors *(appendix 1)*. These behaviors were measured on a Likert scale taking into account students' previous English learning experiences in high school or language institutes. The same survey was completed by the students once they finished their first semester, in order to establish the exit profile and, consequently, the impact of the course. These 30 behaviors fit into five categories that allowed the contrast and analysis of the profiles of entrance and exit. The five categories are:

Table 1: Autonomous Behaviors Categories

	Categories
1	Setting Objectives
2	Metacognitive Processes
3	Development of Learning Strategies
4	Self-monitoring and Self-evaluation
5	Selection and Design of Materials and Learning Activities

Table 2 displays a sample of the way the students' answers were classified on a Likert scale:

Table 2: Students' Answers in Category 1

Category 1 Setting Objectives	Behavior	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
	#2	1	2	10	9
	#8	0	1	8	12
	#17	2	1	17	2
	#23	0	0	0	22
	#25	0	1	14	7
		1%	**2%**	**44%**	**53%**

The first column in Table 2 indicates the category evaluated, the second column shows the numbering of behaviors on the survey chart *(appendix 1)*, Columns 3 to 6 show the four values on the Liker scale, under which the amount of students who chose each options is indicated. Finally, the total percentage of students per choice is shown at the end of each column.

The initial profile shows passive students with very little autonomy in the process of language learning. In the four categories analyzed, responses "Rarely" and "Never" obtained 38% and 53%, respectively, which means there was a 91% absence of autonomous behaviors in the population surveyed with regard to learning English experiences before reaching college. Table 3 below shows the consolidated results of the freshmen's entrance profile:

Table 3: Freshmen's Autonomous Behaviors before the Intervention

Category	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
1. Setting Objectives	1%	2%	44%	53%
2. Metacognitive Processes	5%	5%	35%	55%
3. Development of Learning Strategies	11%	2%	52%	35%
4. Self-monitoring & Self-Evaluation	9%	12%	27%	52%
5. Selection and Design of Learning Materials	0%	0%	32%	68%
	5%	**4%**	**38%**	**53%**

After a semester of the implementation of the syllabus design, described in detail in Ramirez (2005), the survey was re-applied to establish the exit profiles. Table 4 shows a contrast between the percentages obtained at the beginning and at the end, only for the option "Always":

Table 4: Contrast of Entrance and Exit Profile for the answer "Always"

	Category	Initial Percentage	Final Percentage
1	Setting Objectives	1%	80%
2	Reflection, self-knowledge and metacognitive processes	5%	11%
3	Development of Learning Strategies	11%	40%
4	Self-monitoring and Self-evaluation	9%	9%
5	Selection and Design of Materials and Learning Activities	0%	12%

The contrast shows the increase in the frequency of occurrence of the behaviors comprised in each category, in this case for the response "Always". The most evident progress appears in categories 1 (setting goals) and 3 (development of learning strategies). Such an improvement may be due to the fact that the behaviors in both categories correspond to concrete actions and tasks modeled and fostered by the teacher throughout the course, and replicated by the students in both the classroom and the self-access centers. It should be noted that, although students were exposed to a wide array of strategies during the training program sessions, only six strategies were emphasized throughout the course activities and tasks. These strategies belonged to the Metacognitive, Cognitive and Memory categories proposed by Oxford (1990, 2011). The rationale behind adopting a limited number of strategies complies with recommendations made by previous research works in the same institution; the findings of Hernández (2016), for instance, suggest that working on a small set of strategies allows the teacher to monitor better their development, and provides the learners with enough practice to get a grasp of how strategies are applied, and to be able to choose wisely the ones that suit them best.

Different is the case of categories 2 (reflection, self-knowledge and metacognitive processes) and 5 (selection and design of learning materials) in which progress is much subtler, or category 4 (self-monitoring and self-evaluation), which did not show any change; some thoughts on the possible reasons behind these results are presented in the discussion section. Finally, Table 5 displays the contrast between the entrance and the exit profiles regarding all five categories, and taking into account all the answer choices on the Likert scale.

Table 5: Contrast of Entrance and Exit Profile for all Liker Scale

CATEGORY	ALWAYS		SOMETIMES		RARELY		NEVER	
	Entrance	Exit	Entrance	Exit	Entrance	Exit	Entrance	Exit
1 Setting Objectives	1%	**80%**	2%	**9%**	44%	**11%**	53%	**0%**
2 Reflection, self-knowledge and metacognitive processes	5%	**11%**	5%	**7%**	35%	**40%**	55%	**42%**
3 Development of Learning Strategies	11%	**40%**	2%	**39%**	52%	**17%**	35%	**4%**
4 Self-monitoring and Self-evaluation	9%	**9%**	12%	**7%**	27%	**37%**	52%	**47%**
5 Selection and Design of Materials and Learning Activities	0%	**12%**	0%	**8%**	32%	**28%**	68%	**52%**

The contrast between the entrance and the exit profile of freshmen's autonomy shows evident improvement in 3 out of the 5 categories analyzed. In category 1 (setting goals), for instance, freshmen indicated that before reaching college, only a 3% of them would set out short, medium, and long term goals to improve their English proficiency (2% always and 1% sometimes); after the first semester, 89% of this population claim to have set learning goals regarding English on a regular basis (80% always and 9% sometimes). The development of learning strategies (category 3) also reveals an interesting increase of 79% compared to the initial 13% established in the entrance profile (both percentages comprise the answers "always" and "sometimes").

A more subtle -yet valuable- advancement is observed with regard to the selection and/or design of materials and learning activities by the learners themselves (category 5). Initially, 68% of students would never select or design a learning material on their own, while 32% of them would rarely do so. Answers "always" and "sometimes" in this category were not chosen by any student in the entrance profile, as the design of learning activities and the selection of materials is usually attributed to the role of the teacher. The exit profile, however, shows an encouraging 20% of students who make decisions on materials and activities in favor of their learning process (12% always, 8% sometimes). There is still a significant 52% of students who report not doing so ever.

Categories 2 and 4 comprise the behaviors related to metacognition and self-evaluation, respectively. In category 2, the entrance profile indicates that 55% of the surveyed population would never make an introspective look into their learning styles, their personal needs or

their progress towards language learning; whereas 35% of them would rarely do it, for a total 90% of people showing a rather passive attitude in terms of metacognitive processes. After the course implementation, this 90% of the population only decreased to an 82% (40% rarely, 42% never). In the case of category 4, the lack of autonomy in terms of self-evaluating and self-monitoring behaviors was evidenced in 79% of the students in the entrance profile, which increased to an 84% in the exit profile. Once again, monitoring and evaluation of learning processes are traditionally considered a responsibility of the teacher only, which might be the reason why the participants of this study struggled to take full control of these activities.

Discussion

The entrance profile of students regarding autonomy showed a self-perception that was far from the profile established by the initial survey. The students had a blurred concept of autonomy, which they often confused with responsibility. Most of them claimed to be highly autonomous because they attended classes regularly, because they handed in their homework on time, and because they did what they were asked to do; on the basis of these perceptions, it seems fair to suggest that there was certain degree of reactive –but not proactive- autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). Later, through the element of student / teacher dialogue (Cotterall, 1995) promoted throughout the course, all students reported having learned something on their own: one student had learned to play guitar by watching YouTube videos, another one learned Japanese on internet forums to interact in online videogames, another student was a self-taught cook, and so on, they all identified some kind of knowledge about which they had made the decision to acquire based on a particular need. However, when this was extrapolated to the educational field, all of the students agreed that when learning takes place framed formally in an academic institution, decisions about what, when and how to learn are delegated to the institution or teacher. Therefore, the learning strategies that they have empirically developed in other facets of their lives, as well as the self-knowledge about their learning styles and preferences, are elements that the students unconsciously leave out of the academic institution. It is a culture that has been brewed over many generations and which takes time to be transformed.

The positive results obtained in categories 1, 3 and 5 correspond to the principles proposed by Cotterall (2000), on which the design of the implemented course was based. In the first place, the setting

of objectives by the students was one of the activities that was most emphasized during the course. In fact, students participated in the designed the syllabus's objectives, as a course based on the development of autonomy must allow learners to identify their needs and plan their learning accordingly. The idea of someone else deciding what, when and how to learn does not make much sense, yet again, in the educational field this is the idea that implicitly prevails. Therefore, every activity, every task, and every assignment students were exposed to, had an explicit objective, and throughout the course students were encouraged to set short and long-term goals for what they wanted and needed to learn. It is up to them to decide what level of proficiency they want to achieve in the language according to their personal purposes. In this sense, both the content and the pacing of the course, as well as the sequence in which the curriculum is distributed, are only a proposal that the learner can (and must, for that matter) modify and complement in favor of successful learning; this proposal is not a straitjacket with which learners must resign themselves and settle for. In fact, when a students is not willing to modify the syllabus or to complement it, he is assuming a passive behavior through which, unconsciously, the responsibility of choosing what, when and how to learn is casted over the teacher's shoulders, as well as the student's academic success or failure.

Also, the implementation of the course through a task-based approach allowed, on the one hand, for each task to be explicitly focused on the exploration and development of a specific learning strategy; on the other hand, it allowed for each task material to serve as a model for students to choose or design similar resources on their own, for their practices outside the classroom. In fact, for each task modeled in class, two or three more tasks were designed and left in the self-access centers, so that the material available for students' retrieval and autonomous practices was related to the topics and methodology that students were familiar with. Its stands to reason that this is the explanation for the positive increase of percentages in categories 3 and 5, in the exit profile, as well as the increase in visits to the self-access centers.

Conversely, categories 2 and 4, which did not evince a meaningful change, imply a challenge for the constant promotion of learner autonomy through the curricula. Making a student aware of the need to evaluate both his own learning and the type of learner he/she is, give rise to a change in the traditional roles that have been culturally delegated to the teacher, as well as a gradual transfer of responsibilities to the domain of the learner. The challenge here lies in the fact that, in turn, the teacher

has to be aware and willing to transfer such responsibilities, without fear of losing control of the class, the group or even the institution.

The biggest challenge, however, is not just for the students, but for all the people who make up the staff of a given institution. In administrative terms, the promotion of autonomy implies the commitment of the directives and the teachers towards the design of curricula in which the development of the autonomy is a transverse axis, with initial training that equips the learner to be gradually released into the decision-making path. In instrumental terms, this implies the design and implementation of courses that are closely related to the promotion of self-access, which will result in designing materials for the classroom and self-access centers, and thus could represent a little more work than a regular course. It is also very important to remember that any initiative to promote learner autonomy involves the joint effort of a whole team, and not just a couple of teachers, or a couple of isolated courses. If autonomy is a desire and an institutional goal, then the whole institution and its academic apparatus must concentrate on this aim, so that the learner perceives that autonomy is part of the general environment of the institution, and not of the preference of some isolated teachers.

Finally, the weaknesses and limitations of this study mainly lie on two facts. First, this study offers a snapshot of autonomous behaviors before and after an implementation, but the impact of such behaviors on language proficiency hasn't been measured. Future works, consequently, should observe students' progress in their language proficiency; this however, needs to be done after students have been exposed to at least three or four courses based on the promotion of autonomy. Second, the endeavor was undertaken by one English professor, in a major where students learn two foreign languages (English and French) compulsory and simultaneously. In this sense, future work needs to focus on implementing the proposal at a greater scale, involving teachers from the French department and other subjects, and monitoring the students' progress in a wider scope comprising at least the first 3 semesters.

Conclusion

The promotion of learner autonomy in a university implies a previous process of diagnosis and evaluation of the institution, the opportunities this latter offers for the development of independent learners and an introspective look into the institutional culture. These aspects should be taken care of before designing a curricular proposal. Secondly, the curricular proposal must have a robust apparatus in

favor of autonomy at all levels of the instruction. In other words, the implementation must go beyond a single course, or a small training.

Although autonomy might be stated as a desirable goal, institutions are not always clear about what is needed to implement a true promotion of independent learning. Both teachers and students are often the product of a culture and a long tradition, characterized by the lack of autonomous behaviors in formal educational context. Therefore, changing the conception and roles points toward the adoption of new habits on both sides; but above all it points toward the implementation of long-term plans to beget the seed of an institutional culture, that goes beyond the personal desire of a teacher or the particular design of a single course. A good training program in autonomy and learning strategies at a university level should take place in a medium-term process, in which at least the first three semesters serve as the foundation, and from then on, the student will be empowered and released, little by little, into his/her own decision-making path. Ideally, however, the endeavor of learner autonomy, in language learning and in all fields of knowledge, should be implemented as early as possible, starting in primary school and high school.

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Appendix 1: Autonomous Behaviors Survey

Note: this survey has been taken from Ramirez (2015), who designed each utterance by adapting the characteristics of autonomous learners proposed by Aparicio et al. (1995), Cárdenas (2003), Dam (1995), and Dickinson (1992).

Read the following statements and choose the option that better describes their degree of certainty, as appropriate	Always	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
1. At school, you were able to determine your level of English proficiency.				
2. At school, you reflected about the relationship between English and the cultures associated to this language.				
3. You discovered and explored your favorite ways of relating to the language.				
4. At school you discovered your particular learning style and strategies to learn English effectively.				
5. You used your knowledge, preferences, habits, and strategies to select and plan activities to learn English on your own.				
6. You expressed your preferences for certain types of learning activities in class.				
7. You used diaries or language portfolios to monitor your progress in learning English.				
8. You set out short, medium, and long term goals to improve your English proficiency.				
9. You used all resources available to study and practice English on your own (libraries, internet, software, music, literature, television, etc.).				
10. You devoted time to study and practice English while you were not being monitored by your teacher.				
11. You took on extra assignments or academic activities to learn English, even if this did not represent a course grade.				
12. You looked for opportunities to learn and practice English outside of school.				
13. You carried out extracurricular activities when you considered necessary to learn or reinforce a particular topic.				