

LEARNER TRAINING TOWARDS AUTONOMY IN THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

Eva Alcón
Universitat Jaume I

Introduction

As Littlewood (1995) suggests, the term autonomy may be considered from a general perspective to refer to a capacity of thinking and acting independently in any situation, or it may be understood to refer to learning autonomy. In this paper, although the essential components of autonomy and autonomous learning are identical, we will focus on autonomy in language education. Few people would disagree with the importance of autonomy in language learning (Dam, 1995; Dickinson and Wenden, 1995; Benson and Voller 1997); however it would be difficult not to disagree in its meaning and applications for language education. As far as its meaning is concerned, terms such as autonomy, individual learning, self-direction and self-access have been used as alternatives to deal with the complexity of language education since the Second World War. In theory, the underlying assumptions of the terms include Holec's definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1980:3). Its applications, however, are much more controversial. A clear example can be found in learners' use of self access centres, or in the use of traditional textbooks to develop autonomy and independence in learning. Palmer and Posteguillo (1996) and Sheerin (1997) claim that the mere existence of self-access facilities does not ensure independent learning; the self-access facilities need to be located within a clear theoretical perspective to provide learners with the opportunity to learn how to become autonomous learners. Similarly, Gremmo and Riley (1995) claim that using traditional textbooks as if they were suitable for self-directed learning causes confusion, since learners are forced to find their way through the book without any real learner training.

In this paper we will try to define the sense in which the word autonomy is used and how it can be implemented in the Spanish university context. Firstly, we will identify the components of autonomous learning and relate these to formal settings, Spanish university classrooms where English is a compulsory

subject. Secondly, we will present and evaluate a methodological approach to help learners to develop their potential capacity as autonomous language learners, taking into account the components of autonomy described.

Components of autonomous learning in formal settings

Some of the fundamental areas in which learners' autonomy may be promoted are determining learning goals, selecting learning materials to achieve those goals, and self-assessment of language learning. However, these areas may seem to be difficult to foster in formal settings (Harris, 1997). In particular, we will refer to the Spanish university context where English as a foreign language is compulsory. Lack of motivation to learn English, large classes meeting for only two hours a week, external evaluation conducted at the end of the year, objectives often fixed at the outset, a normative view of the teaching process, and an extreme dependence upon the teacher are some of the features which may present serious limitations to the teacher if he/she wishes to promote learners' autonomy. As we have mentioned in the introduction, one alternative could be to promote learners' autonomy via self-access centres or in the academic context. Here we will concentrate on developing autonomy in the classroom context.

Two assumptions are taken as our starting point to analyze the components of autonomous learning. The first is that, although educational, cultural, and social factors may influence learners' beliefs and attitudes towards language learning, every human being is potentially an autonomous learner. The degree of autonomy is thus gradual, and we can talk about autonomization. The second assumption, related to this process of autonomization, deals with the interdependence between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. As suggested by Little (1995:179-180) "we must provide trainee teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in the learners who will be given into their charge, but we must also give them a first hand experience of learner autonomy in their training." In formal teaching, the link between teacher training and learner training can be found in the fact that learners are reluctant to take charge of their learning. Teachers must help them to do so by reflecting on the meaning of the concept of learning to learn a language. In so doing, the teacher herself/himself adopts a reflective approach which helps her/him in the implementation of a methodological approach towards autonomous learning. As suggested by Vieira (1996), reflective teaching and learner training, like two sides of the same coin, are key aspects for autonomous language learning.

An autonomous approach to language learning thus means teachers and learners becoming actively involved in learning to learn what goes on in the

learning process. This, in turn, means:

- a. Learning to reflect on their attitudes towards learning and their personal learning experiences
- b. Learning to select learning and communicative goals
- c. Learning to select specific tasks related to the goals
- d. Learning to organize the time and material to achieve the goals
- e. Learning to select and use appropriate learning and communication strategies
- f. Learning to assess and monitor the learning progress regularly

Clearly both the teacher and the learner will play an important role in this reflective approach towards the learning process. In what follows we will focus on describing an experience which aimed to foster the development of learner autonomy in English as a foreign language learning, through the implementation of a reflective approach to language learning.

Implementing a reflective approach to language learning to foster autonomy in the Spanish University context

Although developing learners' autonomy is a general concern in language methodology, two general variables must be considered to understand both the significance and limitations of this study: contextual variables and learners' representation of language learning.

Contextual variables and learners' representations of language learning

By contextual variables we refer to those institutional constraints which are difficult for the teacher and learner to modify. In particular, we will mention three: large classes with different language levels, external evaluation conducted at the end of the year, objectives fixed at the outset and achieved through a task-based approach to language learning. The first constraint is due to the large number of students per class in Spanish universities and the incorporation of the English language as a compulsory subject on all degree course. The last two constraints are determined by the fact that different teachers, whose representations about language learning and the time devoted to the teaching of English at the University may differ. Besides, they teach to different groups of students, and students have to take the same exam at the end of the academic

year. In an attempt to establish certain parameters, general objectives are determined, and tasks rather than linguistic elements are used as units of analysis in developing the syllabus.

As far as the second general variable is concerned, recent research has explained the central role played by learners' beliefs and representations of language and language learning (Riley, 1989; Villanueva and Navarro, forthcoming). Cotterall (1995: 196) reports that the beliefs language learners hold about the learning process may either contribute or impede the development of their potential for autonomy. However, we suggest that learners' representation of their learning is not fixed but it may be modified through reflection. Thus, examining learners' beliefs about language learning is the first step in helping them to become aware of their learning goals. Appendix A shows the questionnaire developed after oral interviews held with 100 learners chosen at random. The interviews were conducted to elicit a variety of motivation, affective responses and learner independence towards language learning. The responses during the interviews then served as the basis for a 40-item Likert-style questionnaire which was administered to 180 subjects. Factor analysis was used to identify the factors derived from the set of variables presented in the questionnaire. Three factors were obtained: motivation, role of the teacher, and the role of feedback. The three factors displayed an acceptable standardized alpha (.8 or above).

Learners who agree with the following statements, which cluster together as the motivation factor, do not correspond to the profile of autonomous learners:

1. Studying English at the University will help me in the future
4. I am not interested in learning English, although it is part of my general education
26. I am not interested in learning English but it may be useful in the future

Learners accept the importance of the English language as Spanish society accepts it, but we can clearly observe a lack of intrinsic motivation. To follow Dickinson's conclusions (1995: 165), our learners seem to lack those features of autonomous learners which help them to become highly motivated and lead them to more effective work.

The second factor, the role of the teacher, represented an obstacle for our methodological approach. The statements clustered as factor 2 indicate that learners expect the teachers to behave in a traditional and authoritarian way.

7. I like the teacher to tell me how to study
8. I like the teacher to tell me how long I should study English
9. I like the teacher to tell me what to study
21. I think the teacher should explain the grammar and vocabulary

Finally, the notion of feedback is related to learners' view of the role of the teacher. As can be observed in the following cluster of items, learners tend to depend on the teacher for feedback on their language performance:

15. I find it helpful for the teacher to correct my homework

23. I like the teacher to tell me how I am progressing

40. I like my teacher to plan and evaluate my language learning progress.

Learners' beliefs about the English language teacher and the role of feedback were not in accord with the methodological approach that we had decided to implement in order to foster autonomy in the English language classroom. So we needed to come to an agreement on teacher's and learners' expectations. This, in turn, implied helping teachers and learners to become aware of the learning process, taking into account the constraints of the University context.

Methodological approach

Although we have focused on teachers and learners' learning awareness, the distinction between language and learning awareness, like the distinction between communication and learning strategies or between knowledge and skills is not an easy one. Although these pairs are differentiated in research, one has to admit that people learn to learn while learning a language, and that in doing so they use learning strategies and need to put their knowledge of the language into use, which, sometimes, involves the use of communication strategies. Since the interrelationship between these aspects seems obvious, we took teachers' and learners' awareness of the learning process as our point of departure. In particular, we focussed on awareness of task knowledge as a point of departure. In other words, what we looked for was knowledge about the nature and purpose of the task. As suggested by Wenden (1995), one should be able to answer the following questions: Why should I do the task? What kind of task is it? and How should I do it? The following procedure was adopted:

a. Learners were asked to form groups of four and to select a speaker who would be replaced after each task. Although we were concerned with the learner as an individual with his/her cognitive style and learning strategies, we also agree with Allwright's claim (1990:12) that in autonomy one can observe an equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence. Discussion in groups focussed on the three factors obtained from the questionnaire: motivation, role of the teacher, and role of feedback. Three whole

sections were devoted to discussion of these issues and illustrating them from previous experiences.

b. The teacher handed out one task focussed on spoken language and receptive skills plus the four sections in Appendix B. The teacher and the whole class worked together and answered the questions in the Appendix. It is the teacher who was in charge of classroom interaction.

c. The teacher handed out one task focussed on spoken language and production skills, and the four sections in Appendix B. The teacher and the whole class worked together and answered the questions in the appendix. It was the teacher who was in charge of classroom interaction.

d. The teacher handed out another task focussed on spoken language and receptive and productive skills. The teacher and the whole class worked together, but the teacher deliberately stood back and allowed learners to participate actively in classroom discussion.

e. The teacher handed out one task focussed on written language and receptive skills plus the four sections in Appendix B. The teacher and the whole class worked together and answered the questions in the Appendix. It was the teacher who was in charge of classroom interaction.

f. The teacher handed out one task focussed on written language and production skills, and the four sections in Appendix B. The teacher and the whole class worked together and answered the questions in the Appendix. It was the teacher who was in charge of classroom interaction.

g. The teacher handed out another task focussed on written language and receptive and productive skills. The teacher and the whole class worked together, but the teacher deliberately stood back and allowed learners to participate actively in classroom discussion.

h. Students were asked to go back to their original groups, where they would continue to work for the rest of the academic year. During the course, tasks were performed considering the questions in Appendix B. Each section was planned to take an average of 50 minutes, but time was modified according to the demand of the task and the needs of the learners in each group.

As time went by, there were changes in teachers and learners' motivation as well as in their feelings about the role of the teacher and the role of feedback. In terms of the development of learner autonomy, learners became more actively involved in learning, more motivated and more independent in task management. At the end of the year, the questionnaire in Appendix A was distributed again to the 180 students who followed the methodological

approach described in this paper. The results of the data in the questionnaires allow us to claim that every learner is potentially an autonomous learner. The degree of agreement with statements 6, 10, 11, 12, 32, 34, 36 at the end of the year contrasts with the items that cluster together in the three factors discussed previously. In this sense, our study supports the notion of autonomy as a flexible approach towards language learning, which is valid if we consider the variables of the specific context where the approach is to be implemented. The evaluation of the impact of this methodological approach on teacher development was also positive. Taking a reflective approach to teaching, teachers are more motivated to understand the learning process. They are actively involved in creating new tasks or activities in response to learners' needs, and they certainly avoid the frustration of teaching what learners do not want or do not need to learn. In other words, the authoritarian and traditional role of the teacher becomes a role of supervising and understanding the learning process. In this way, the notion of feedback is also redefined, since learner feedback becomes as important for the teacher as teacher feedback is for the learner.

Conclusion

Our intention has been to present and evaluate a methodological approach based on the assumption that reflective learning and teaching is an alternative way of fostering autonomy in formal settings. Our experience has helped us to realize how learners can develop their potential capacity as autonomous learners, and how teacher development within a reflective approach may contribute to it. The need for collaboration between the people involved in the process of learning a language is suggested as a necessary condition, if we want to continue focussing our attention on the different factors that may potentially contribute to autonomous learning. Finally, the importance of context related variables and teachers and learners' representations of language learning should be taken into account in any further research on learner and teacher training towards autonomy.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Please, indicate the degree of agreement with the following statements about English language learning:

1. Studying English at the University will help me in the future.
2. Studying English helps me to make foreign friends.
3. Studying English helps me to understand texts suggested by other subject teachers.
4. I am not interested in learning English, although it is part of my general education.
5. English is an interesting subject.
6. I like studying English on my own.
7. I like the teacher to tell me how to study.
8. I like the teacher to tell me how long I should study English.
9. I like the teacher to tell me what to study.
10. It is important for me to decide what to study.
11. It is important for me to decide how to study.
12. It is important for me to decide when I can study.
13. It is important for me to see the progress I make.
14. I need the teacher to explain the results of the regular tests.
15. I find it helpful for the teacher to correct my homework.
16. I like to know the reasons of my success/failure in my language learning.
17. I have my own ways of testing how much I have learned.
18. I hate talking to the teacher about my progress.
19. I like organizing my own learning.
20. I like guessing unfamiliar words.
21. I think the teacher should explain the grammar and vocabulary.
22. I feel embarrassed when I have to speak English.
23. I like the teacher to tell me how I am progressing.
24. I feel happy when I have an English class.
25. I am not interested in learning English.
26. I am not interested in learning English but it may be useful in the future.
27. I like the teacher to be next to me when I am studying English.
28. I feel anxious when I have an English class.
29. I do not like talking about my progress.
30. I feel comfortable when I understand the grammatical points in a dialogue.
31. I like analyzing the language.
32. I like knowing what I have to do in an activity.
33. I like trying new things out by myself.

34. I like knowing how I have to do an activity.
35. It is important for me to decide the aim of the activity with the teacher.
36. I like reflecting about my learning progress.
37. It is important for me to have a clear idea of what I am doing while I am learning English.
38. It is important for me to decide and plan how I have to learn.
39. I have my own ways of organizing my learning.
40. I like my teacher to plan and evaluate my language learning progress.

Appendix B

SECTION 1

0. What is the purpose of the task?
1. What knowledge/skill do I/learners already know?
2. What knowledge/skill do I/learners need to know?
3. How is the task divided to get what you/learners need to know?
4. Is there any aspect which you/learners need to know, which is not included? Suggest it and modify the task with the help of the teacher.

SECTION 2

5. Review the notes from the previous section and finish the discussion.
6. Try to perform the task.
7. How well are you/learners doing?
8. What problems have you/learners found?
9. What are you/learners doing to do next?
10. How are you/learners going to do it?

SECTION 3

11. Review the notes from the previous section and perform the modified task/tasks.
12. What have you/learners learned?
13. What should have you/learners learned that you/learners have not learned yet?
14. What knowledge/skill do you/learners need now?
15. What can help you/learners to acquire the language knowledge/skill needed?
16. How should I organize the next learning task, considering what I/learners need to know now?

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