Original article

Learning autonomy as a key factor in the knowledge construction process

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ABSTRACT

Improving advanced academic dynamics means that students will be in favorable positions to enhance intellectual resources and metacognitive development, an expression of autonomy achieved in their learning. In these directions, experiences related to the use of technological resources are offered: online educational software, social networks and mobile telephony, as opportunities for autonomous or self-directed learning, in response to cognitive needs and intellectual development; consequently, autonomous learning, accompanied by technologies, enhances capabilities for know-how, as a strategy that favors interactive processes in the dynamics of integration of knowledge for the production of content.

Keywords: Autonomous learning; Cognitive independence; Advanced technologies.

Introduction

The term "autonomy in learning" is still at the core of many learner-centered educational theories. This is surprising if one also takes into account the new direction learning has taken and the development experienced in the technological field. In fact, the rapid growth of online educational resources and software, social networks and mobile telephony, open new opportunities for autonomous or self-directed learning with new proposals for activities that give academic attention to all skills and diverse content. On the other hand, digital and interactive activities can be considered democratic by erasing center and periphery, placing all students in the same community, giving way to greater integration and collaboration among learners in real circumstances of language use.

Therefore, an educational change is necessary in our Network Society where all information is already digitized (Castells 2005). And this change must take place in the construction of knowledge, introducing it to teachers who in many cases, unlike their students, did not grow up with sophisticated digital tools, all of which distances them from the effective use of new technologies in the classroom. Therefore, students in the XXXX are familiar with these technologies and, as summarized by Ruiz Tarragó (2007), they provide them with "social interaction, information, autonomy and fun, although they also cause them some uneasiness" (Ruiz Tarragó, 2007).

Thus, the digital presence has had an impact on behavior, attitudes and even on the interpretation and evaluation of the infinite amount of information that arrives daily and constantly. And while it is true that personalized learning platforms can occupy the space hitherto monopolized by teachers, they must understand how to apply them to become managers of time and space for learning; offering an optimal learning framework.

Teachers will not be able to be content with offering good texts and good grammatical explanations, because that will be done by teaching platforms that offer "packaged" and pseudo-personalized content through the network.

For all these reasons, teacher training is indispensable to offer a "memorable experience" (Czikszentmihalyi 1996) that involves the student with tasks that give control to their learning. In short, they are stimulated to "know how to do" and to "enjoy" the achievements of their own development, to promote students' intrinsic motivation and their capacity for autonomy in their own learning process. It is valid to highlight the studies about the benefits of autonomous learning with the emergence and use of new technologies; perhaps that is why, despite the passage of the years and the

large number of research papers that contextualize the concept and analyze the development of the variety of techniques applied to develop, the effectiveness they cause in the dynamics of "autonomy" enhance learning, - Little 1991, Swarbrick 1994, Benson 2001, Gardner 2011, among others - its definition has remained as Holec presented it more than three decades ago:

> (…)the process in which learners are aware of their learning objectives, plan and make decisions about what and how they want to learn, and take responsibility for their own learning process, which ultimately increases their motivation.[1]

This definition leads to two main issues. First, The Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines autonomous learning: "the learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn". In fact, it should perhaps be pointed out that autonomous learning requires that the learner is fully responsible for the decisions related to his or her learning and for the implementation of all his or her decisions (Dickinson 1992) and fully controls the content, both of the language and of the learning process itself (Macero 2008) and (Dam 1995). According to Dam (1995), this also implies that the learner must take control of his or her own learning process and fully understand it; be able to define objectives, select materials, plan and carry out evaluations. In short, the learner must be part of the process and be aware of his or her own development (Pemberton 1996).

Development

Based on the analyses and evaluations related to the achievement of autonomy in learning, it is clear that it is not only the student who must modify his role in the learning process in order to achieve the necessary autonomy. While the student goes from being a passive receiver of information to an active subject with an interest in his own development process, responsible for his learning, he will act both independently and in cooperation with others (Dam1995). The teacher must also abandon the attitude

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of transmitter of knowledge to become a facilitator, by proposing different learning strategies that lead his students to find the methods intended to teach them to learn. In other words, according to Camilleri (1997), the teacher is responsible for presenting students with effective learning strategies and styles, abandoning the toxic pedagogy centered on the teacher and the subject matter that does not reinforce the identity of the individual to enjoy the learning experience. The priority is to intersperse effective strategies, both technological and "traditional".

An atmosphere conducive to empathy and self-esteem is essential, and it must be conducive to confidence in them. The learning space must have a positive and constructive interaction between teachers and students, aimed at socialization and cooperation. Such cooperation is essential for students to feel comfortable and not hesitate to share their doubts, questions and conclusions. And, while cooperation among the students themselves fosters active and communicative social practice, self-esteem and self-confidence are increased; while self-esteem, increases participation and makes students capable of "taking risks" (Cervantes 2013) by discovering mistakes, so that feedback becomes a positive learning strategy. This situation has been evident in the 2018-2019 course group in which this interaction has enabled collaborative speech and discourse. The student is aware that without speech there is no learning.

For all the above, it is stated that autonomous learning has become imperative for any student-focused institution with a strong will to enhance motivation, seen this as key to autonomy and success. Therefore, we reflect on the traditional roles to adopt a constructivist philosophy from which we stop transmitting knowledge directly to let the student himself build it (Vigotsky 1987). Faced with multiple realities, constructivism allows the student to interpret and construct from his own reality. Thus, learning depends on the learner's cultural background, and the teacher must consider this cultural experience so that perception and communication is fluid and generates greater confidence.

Processing and developing such changes in teachers and students is not a simple task, as it requires changes in the way education has been traditionally perceived and the (re)accommodation of the roles assigned to teachers of directing, guiding and evaluating to favor the transition from passive to active students. This is the greatest challenge faced by teachers since students come from a primary and secondary education system that does not sufficiently develop clearly defined autonomous training, hence their attitude towards learning has been mainly passive, with teachers acquiring a dominant

and unquestioned position. As a consequence, methodologies and strategies are not applied in many classrooms, generated by the insufficiencies in the specialization of teachers. All this has not facilitated the way to social interaction, nor the consequent autonomous learning.

On the other hand, for the B2 level course for students who have passed the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE), guided and structured study plans have been designed based on metacognitive and constructivist knowledge models (Vigostky 1987), which, according to Benson & Voller (1997), reaffirm that knowledge is discovered, not taught. This is mainly because knowledge cannot be taught but must be learned to organize and structure from one's own experience. The study plans or guides incorporate certain projects chosen for and by the students that allow them to know in advance the activities and content of the course to be carried out. The student must learn to follow his own guide and organize himself by assimilating his own knowledge, being an active participant in his own learning process, while developing his creative capacity that allows him to learn how to learn. Awareness of his own process will help to regulate self-control and manipulate the cognitive process (Oxford 1990).

At the beginning of the course, students receive a questionnaire that invites them to reflect on the motives that have led them to study the language. These motives are divided into intrinsic (self-stimuli) and extrinsic (when they are based on responses to an external stimulus). But, in addition, they can be analyzed on the basis of the division between instrumental, interactivity, integration or sociocultural, as they depend on the conditions of the students and their attitude towards culture, their previous knowledge and work objectives. Secondly, students identify their objectives and value the methodology that best helps them in their learning. Motivation encourages them to pursue an action and thus set their own objectives.

Once the questionnaires have been analyzed, the study plans are reviewed and the activities most appropriate to the group are chosen for the best outcome. Students were able to observe that their decisions were present in the teaching and their participation was evident. Metacognitive strategies and interactive activities were incorporated with feedback offered by the teacher and the students themselves. The teacher was the transmitter of knowledge and the student the receiver, to embrace the transition to an interactive process with activities that facilitate student activity, participation and production; as they advance in their learning, their autonomy is consolidated, building

meanings from their previous knowledge - scaffolding method - and from the inside to the outside, from their environment and the establishment of analogies.

Each task provided by the teacher also includes a final evaluation that allows reflection on the results and learning acquired from the activity. Thus, the design of activities is initially done by the teacher based on clear instructions and a gradual path. In addition, an attempt is made to have students use correction signs or clear identifiers for the functional or grammatical contents worked on in each activity. In this way, students will recognize at a glance which function they have to undertake, as well as the objectives of each task. Thus, written texts are delivered with elements marked or underlined in different colors according to what the student needs to work on (Cotos 2011; Vickers 2006). Gradually, the participation and production capacity of the activities increases until reaching an autonomous level in which the student takes control of the process, including evaluation.

On the other hand, in higher grades, the use of textbooks is resumed to adapt authentic materials from different registers that cover skills, grammatical and functional content, in order to bring students closer to the reality and culture where the language is spoken. For students at higher levels, the use of the textbook also allows them to deepen specific grammatical concepts. Authentic reading and listening materials have served as the basis for designing structured and meaningful activities (Piaget 1971, Brunner 1996, Breen 1985, Widdowson 1990) because they work on all skills using motivating work methods and patterns: creation of campaigns, presentations, videos, among many others. Currently, there is a variety of platforms with which they create activities to be presented in class, using audiovisual material that they themselves choose, abandoning the prepared recording. Students design activities for their classmates and feedback is provided, which allows for the evaluation of each other. This experience reaffirmed that there is no better way to learn than by teaching.

After a certain period of time, students should be able to discern for themselves which activities are the most suitable to achieve their objectives and which activities can be done from a written or audiovisual text. In addition, it is a fact that collaborative projects and activities have a positive effect on learning and software applications, accompanied by the use of internet platforms, increase student motivation. Among the activities that have been carried out in the academic year we find the reflective journal as an example of metacognitive practice in which the learner identifies his objectives, strategies and needs, while reviewing the materials and analyzing the results. The

reflective journal is an introspective tool that helps students gain confidence, make sense of the materials, identify problems, suggest solutions, and generate ideas or opinions of their own (Nunan 1999) and, on the other hand, can account for their intellectual potential (Wenden 107). The diaries allow them to verbalize their own awareness of the course and express how they perform their tasks, face their doubts, make their hypotheses and expose the problems they encounter, discovering which tasks are most effective in solving such problems. Verbalizing introspections stimulates the student because it allows him to be part of the decision making in his learning, which transfers control of it to him (Wenden 1998).

This form of learning is based on two premises: autonomy and reciprocity, since group members share the skills they wish to acquire for the benefit of all. In addition, the diary becomes a clear source of self-evaluation, since it favors the exploration of affective, social and cognitive variants (Oxford et al. 21). Not to mention the role of the diaries in supporting teachers by allowing them to design new activities and thus choose the methodology that best involves the students. Research in this field also allows improving educational and evaluative practice because it is a platform for teaching and learning.

Another activity carried out has been the development of portfolios. Although teachers used their own portfolios as a teaching tool, the process of creating a learner's portfolio has been initiated. This task, in addition to promoting reflective processes, is an authentic means of continuous learning assessment of studies and an important tool for teacher practice and teacher training. With portfolios, students' commitment is increased by reflecting on their own objectives and goals, making them responsible for their learning (Córdoba 2004). It is expected that the portfolio will create opportunities for students to give evidence of their performance in a comprehensive manner, as a challenge to their creativity linked to real contexts, by allowing them to systematically judge and assess their own knowledge and skills, values.

On the other hand, during the 2022-2023 academic year, co-assessment was also promoted; this exercise deepens students' understanding of their own learning process to allow them to become more actively and self-directedly involved in their own process, according to their strengths and weaknesses, employing remedial actions and developing their cognitive and metacognitive skills (Falchikov 2005). Co-assessment is an integral part of autonomous learning even if students fail to grasp it at first (Thomson 1996; Gardner and Miller 1999). As an experience, it has turned out to be the most

conflictive element, not only among students but also among teachers, since students do not feel confident or comfortable evaluating a peer, so they state that they do not feel prepared to evaluate themselves either.

Therefore, they must have clear evaluation criteria, guidelines, rubrics and rules while a clear understanding of the materials and content is needed. Thus, for the implementation of co-assessment, appropriate activities and constructive and positive criticism should be identified (Biggs 2000). In this way, it can be stated that self-assessment helps them to know the values of the process and improve their performance, while co-assessment helps them to learn to value the processes and performances of peers as an opportunity to share strategies. There has been much discussion about the value of self- and co-assessments, concluding that this lack of reliability would be the major disadvantage (Blanche 1990), hence it only materializes at very advanced levels of autonomous learning.

In this section it is more than evident that collaboration and cooperation in different activities is a necessity in the autonomous learning of languages. Hence, many of the activities, whether translation or comparative grammar, writing, oral presentations, etc., are carried out collaboratively and in debates, in order to open a space for group dynamics, which refers to language learning in sociocultural contexts. In discussions, the teacher negotiates and transfers the responsibility for learning to the students by becoming the facilitator or guide (Voller 1997). According to (Oxford 1990), group work increases self-esteem as it promotes self-help, feedback and interaction with peers. That is: as facilitators we must resort to methods that enhance self-esteem and do not promote competition.

Returning to the initial point, the development of new technologies and the consequent increase in online resources, so many social networks, educational software and mobile technology, have provided new opportunities to self-direct learning and encourage learner autonomy. Aware of the possibilities offered by these new technologies in the promotion and direct participation of students in autonomous learning, their capabilities are better developed in an appropriate and personalized time and space.

In addition, in recent years, the increasing development of mobile technology has led to a change in the activities that can take place in the classroom space and outside of it, as a facilitating spring for communication between all actors in the process. And despite the possible criticisms of the use of mobile technology that have been recorded, (Jarvis&Szymczyk 2010) for University of the West Indies (UWI) students, it has been

a valid tool to stay constantly connected, by sharing moments and emotions in one's own language practice. Its use in the classroom replaces the paper format and although it seems less suitable for reading and analysis work of certain documents, it has been positive in group learning, added the WhatsApp social application so effective for its ability to provide quick feedback.

In this way, the use of technology is not limited to the resources of materials available online, but has also been applied to the design of activities to be carried out by students, from platforms to which they will access themselves individually or in collaborative work. The activities carried out from these educational platforms have then been shared and opened to the students and have made the solution of tasks feasible from start to finish. Students have produced, executed and evaluated the activity, either grammatical or lexical content, subject to any authentic material, which has allowed the total co-responsibility of the learning process, aimed at enhancing autonomy.

All of the above, indicates that we should not be afraid to take risks as educators; new models, procedures and strategies of search and organization of thought affect cognitive processes and produce changes in mental representations, placing real objects in a space of abstraction, in this, the application of such autonomous and collaborative techniques make the student the author of his own rule, by choosing the necessary space and time, as well as support resources they need. Autonomous learning is not just learning the language or learning the language alone, but collaborative learning in which the learner follows his or her own pace and opens the door to personalization.

The results of the new implementations have been positive, increasing motivation, attendance and participation in classes. The executed tasks have shown that reflection has empowered students about their learning with analytical, reflective, persistent, responsible, daring and creative postures; all of them must reach their goals, and instead teachers as facilitators or guides, we must monitor and identify better learning strategies from affective training and motivation push. In a new society, with new values, certain changes are required in the way learning is conducted, derived from didactic advances that facilitate inclusion.

It can only be said that research reiterates that learning autonomy does not mean learning alone or self-taught, but collaborative and social. The need for a social environment and collaboration is evident in any learning process whose objective is to improve autonomy through increased motivation, and the affective component is a basic element in the process. On the other hand, the results and evaluations of the students

show that most of them have benefited from the change of attitude in teaching and have gained confidence and autonomy.

However, although the process seems to have overcome certain conservative and institutional impositions that conditioned the trainees to a high degree, there is still a long way to go to be able to speak of full autonomous learning. On the other hand, CALL (Computer Assistant Language Learning) and more recently MALU (Mobile Assisted Mobile Used) resources inside and outside the classroom, have fostered autonomy and promoted the ability to interact in the practice of any of the skills. It is evident that the adoption of new technologies has represented an aid in second language learning and an advance in the autonomous process (Schwienhorst 2007; Darasawang and Reinders 2010; Alparda 2010). In addition, these support languages are accepted by the new generations because they are immersed in them. The expected objective is that, based on a clear knowledge of their own objectives, the student will gradually gain the necessary autonomy to define contents and progressions, as well as to self-evaluate the process and learning, since self-evaluation is an integral part of the process (Benson 2001).

Conclusions

The development of new technologies and the consequent increase of online resources, both social networks, educational software and mobile technology, have provided new opportunities for teachers to self-direct learning, while encouraging student autonomy, consolidating a degree of awareness of the possibilities offered by these new technologies, both in the promotion and in the direct participation of students in a dynamic of autonomous learning as an academic resource for the development of their capabilities.

The design of activities that stimulate autonomy, condition the metacognitive practice in which students identify their objectives, strategies and needs, according to the materials available to them, consequently with the results they achieve and analyze the results, so that students acquire independence and confidence to identify problems, generate creative ideas and provide solutions to their own problems.

With the use of technologies, the levels of satisfaction of teachers can be appreciated when assessing and corroborating the progress of their students, evidenced in the academic skills performed in the projects and collaborative activities with a positive effect on learning.