Artículos científicos

Secondary school English learners on the road to autonomy

Estudiantes de inglés de secundaria en el camino hacia la autonomía

Alunos de inglês do ensino médio no caminho para a autonomia

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Abstract

The scope of this study is to investigate which attributes of autonomous learning can be fostered during the language teaching and learning process, in a specific context. To this end, a case study was designed and implemented in a state school in Western Mexico, featuring the participation of two teacher trainees and twelve secondary school learners, English language learners of ages 12 to 14 who attended a non-mandatory 40-hour course under the autonomous learning approach. Prior to this experience, pupils had customarily learned in teacher-centered environments. Teacher trainees kept a research journal through which they tracked the whole process and made it possible to both gain knowledge of autonomous learning and to examine the phenomenon in a real-life context. The journals were analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti software, and the researcher made inferences from the resulting data, including pupils' reactions to the autonomous learning process. Data analysis shows how pupils' behavior and response to the English course was, for the most part, passive at the outset, yet grew increasingly closer to autonomous learning, as the course progressed. To sum up, the data seems to shed light on two main issues: the importance of fostering an environment that encourages autonomous learning-related behavior, and the need to provide appropriate scaffolding strategies to help pupils move towards the development of autonomous learning. This study made it possible to understand that autonomy is a path to be trodden, rather than the natural state of a learner, in this particular educational context.

Resumen

Después de revisar un extenso cuerpo de literatura sobre el aprendizaje autónomo, se hizo evidente que el concepto de autonomía en el aprendizaje de idiomas se usa a menudo junto con otros términos como autoinstrucción, aprendizaje independiente, autodirección y autorregulación. La evidencia existente también parece sugerir que convertirse en un estudiante autónomo no es algo sencillo. El objetivo de este estudio es investigar qué atributos del aprendizaje autónomo se pueden fomentar durante el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de idiomas, en un contexto específico. Para ello, se diseñó e implementó un estudio de caso en una escuela pública del occidente de México, con la participación de dos maestros en formación y doce estudiantes de secundaria, estudiantes del idioma inglés de 12 a 14 años que asistieron a un curso no obligatorio de 40 horas bajo el enfoque de aprendizaje autónomo. Antes de esta experiencia, los alumnos solían aprender en entornos centrados en el profesor. Los docentes en formación escribieron un diario de investigación a través del cual documentaron todo el proceso y permitieron adquirir conocimientos sobre el aprendizaje autónomo y examinar el fenómeno en un contexto de la vida real. Los diarios se analizaron con la ayuda del software Atlas.ti, y el investigador hizo inferencias a partir de los datos resultantes, incluidas las reacciones de los alumnos al proceso de aprendizaje autónomo. El análisis de datos muestra cómo el comportamiento y la respuesta de los alumnos al curso de inglés fue, en su mayor parte, pasivo al principio, pero se acercó cada vez más al aprendizaje autónomo a medida que avanzaba el curso. En resumen, los datos parecen arrojar luz sobre dos cuestiones principales: la importancia de fomentar un entorno que fomente el comportamiento relacionado con el aprendizaje autónomo y la necesidad de proporcionar estrategias de andamiaje adecuadas para ayudar a los alumnos a avanzar hacia el desarrollo del aprendizaje autónomo. Este estudio permitió comprender que la autonomía es un camino a recorrer, más que el estado natural de un aprendiz, en este contexto educativo particular.

Palabras clave: autónomo, inglés, aprendizaje, secundaria, alumnos.

Resumo

Depois de rever um extenso corpo de literatura sobre aprendizagem autónoma, tornou-se evidente que o conceito de autonomia na aprendizagem de línguas é frequentemente utilizado em conjunto com outros termos, como autoinstrução, aprendizagem independente, autodireção e autorregulação. As evidências existentes também parecem sugerir que não é fácil tornar-se um aluno autónomo. O objetivo deste estudo é investigar quais atributos de aprendizagem autônoma podem ser fomentados durante o processo de ensino e aprendizagem de línguas, em um contexto específico. Para isso, foi desenhado e implementado um estudo de caso em uma escola pública no oeste do México, com a participação de dois professores em formação e doze estudantes do ensino médio, estudantes de língua inglesa de 12 a 14 anos que frequentavam um curso não obrigatório.40 horas sob a abordagem de aprendizagem autônoma. Antes dessa experiência, os alunos costumavam aprender em ambientes centrados no professor. Os futuros professores escreveram um diário de investigação através do qual documentaram todo o processo e permitiram-lhes obter informações sobre a aprendizagem autónoma e examinar o fenómeno num contexto da vida real. Os diários foram analisados com auxílio do software Atlas.ti, e a pesquisadora fez inferências a partir dos dados resultantes, incluindo as reações dos alunos ao processo de aprendizagem autônoma. A análise dos dados mostra como o comportamento e a resposta dos alunos ao curso de inglês foram, em sua maioria, passivos no início, mas tornaram-se cada vez mais próximos da aprendizagem autônoma à medida que o curso avançava. Em resumo, os dados parecem lançar luz sobre duas questões principais: a importância de promover um ambiente que incentive o comportamento relacionado com a aprendizagem autónoma e a necessidade de fornecer estratégias de suporte adequadas para ajudar os alunos a avançar no desenvolvimento da aprendizagem autónoma. Este estudo permitiu-nos compreender que a autonomia é um caminho a percorrer, e não o estado natural de um aprendiz, neste contexto educativo particular.

Palavras-chave: autônomo, inglês, aprendizagem, ensino médio, estudantes.

Introduction

Interest in autonomous learning has grown considerably in recent decades. Benson (2001) reviewed the literature on autonomy in language teaching and learning from its inception in the mid-70s to the year 2000, while Holec (1981) published a key report in the field of autonomy in language education in which autonomy was defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p 3). Thus, practical applications that emphasized independent learning were sought over an extensive period, and this led to the advent of self-access centers and learner training programs as centers of experimentation (Benson, 2006).

Although learner autonomy has been associated with "a radical restructuring of language pedagogy [including] the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working" (Allwright, 1988, p. 35), the educational context wherein the concept of autonomous learning is to be implemented must be considered before embarking on this type of innovation.

There is currently a call for research on autonomy in the field of education and research the world over, and Mexico's Department for National Strategic Programs (PRONACES) has encouraged universities nationwide to undertake research projects in keeping with its mandates and lines of research. This paper stems from the University of Colima's participation in PRONACES, and centers on a research project on the promotion of autonomy through educational processes a secondary school level.

This project was implemented in a rural town in the state of Colima in Western Mexico. A 40-hour English course, divided in 20 lessons, was designed following the principles and practices of autonomous learning, and was taught by two Foreign Language Teaching undergraduate students. Participating pupils were secondary school learners, aged from 12 to 14, who attended the 2-hour sessions of their own volition.

Each of the 20 lessons focused on the development of one or more strategies and skills intended to support autonomous learning and teacher trainees kept a research journal, one per lesson, in which they reported on these and emergent aspects of autonomy that they observed in each lesson. The resulting data was then analyzed using Atlas.ti software, which enables the managing, coding and publishing of qualitative research data.

Based on a critical analysis of the definitions of autonomy derived from a review of current literature. The review highlights major concepts associated with autonomy. Establishing differences and similarities among all these concepts leads us towards a deeper understanding of learner autonomy. The research problem focuses on discovering exactly which attributes

of autonomous learning (including other terms used simultaneously to signify autonomy) were identifiable during the English language learning process of the pupils participating in the course, according to what was reported by the teacher trainees in their research journals.

Definitions

The concept of autonomy, the ability to think and act for oneself, has been broadly reviewed. A deeper understanding of autonomy among educators can contribute to wider promotion thereof in educational settings. Definitions by reputable researchers in this field delineate finer details which enhance our understanding of the concept in educational contexts.

Jiménez Raya, Terry & Vieira (2007, p. 1) define autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter) personal empowerment and social transformation". This definition emphasizes crucial aspects of autonomy, including its internal nature (competence), social responsibility, and critical awareness.

Other authors approach autonomy from the perspective of motivation. For example, Ryan & Deci (2017) claim that certain ways of acting and regulating the environment are energized and directed by the motivational condition of autonomy. Autonomy is an innate, constantly available source of motivation that, when stimulated and promoted by environmental factors, is fully capable of energizing pupils' pursuit of their own interests, interest-driven challenges, learning, volitional internalizations, and engagement with possible learning chances.

Others relate the notion of autonomy with the concept of rationality.

> autonomy is about making rationally informed choices; thus, for autonomy to be developed as an educational aim, the pupils have to cultivate various forms of rationality and acquire basic knowledge. In fact, rationality has always been conceptually connected with the idea of freedom and autonomy. The human being is a rational creature and in the exercise of his/her intellectual powers s/he realises his/her own essence, that is, his/her autonomy and authenticity (Jimenez Raya & Viera, 2015, p. 18-19).

Little (1991) defines autonomy as a person's capacity for "detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4). This implies, but also assumes, that the learner will form a specific type of emotional relationship with the nature and scope of his

learning. The learner's potential for autonomy will be demonstrated in both how they absorb new information and how it is applied to larger contexts.

Macaro (1997) defines autonomy in the sphere of responsibility arguing that it

> is an ability to take charge of one's own language learning and an ability to recognize the value of taking responsibility for one's own objectives, content, progress, method and techniques of learning. It is also an ability to be responsible for the pace and rhythm of learning and the evaluation of the learning process (p. 168).

Many studies on autonomy in learning begin by quoting Holec. His frequently cited definition of learner autonomy refers to 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning… and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning…' (Holec, 1981, p. 3).

In his description of the characteristics of the autonomous learner, Holec states that taking control of one's own learning comprises determining learning objectives and content, choosing learning materials, keeping track of learning progress, and self-evaluating learning. These concepts have influenced educational theory and practice, and they have sparked an investigation into other strategies for encouraging meaningful learning, particularly in language teaching and learning. Focus has been placed on learners' participation and role in the educational process, with the idea that they can act on their own behalf rather than have things done to or for them.

In language learning, 'autonomy' is often erroneously used synonymously with and/or closely together with, other terms such as self-instruction, independent learning, self-direction, and self-regulation. Understanding precise definitions of these terms is important, to avoid confusion among terms.

Self-instruction

Researchers have characterized self-instruction in a variety of ways. Dickinson (1987) defined it as "situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 5). Jones (1998) defined self-instruction in a narrower way as "a deliberate long-term learning project instigated, planned, and carried out by the learner alone, without teacher intervention" (Jones, 1998, p. 378). Benson (2001) defined it quite broadly as "any deliberate effort by the learner to acquire or master language content or skills" (Benson, 2001, p.62).

Independent learning

As per Candy (1991), independent learning is a strategy and educational philosophy in which pupils gain knowledge on their own and foster both enquiry and critical thinking aptitudes. Independent learning is a process in which pupils acquire the values, attitudes, knowledge, and abilities necessary to make responsible decisions and take appropriate actions with reference to their own learning (Williams, 2003).

Additionally, there is a general agreement that independent learning is supported by providing opportunities and experiences that foster learner motivation, curiosity, self-assurance, and self-reliance. This understanding is based on learners' awareness of their own interests and on value being placed on learning for the sake of learning (Gorman, 1998).

> Independent Learning, then, is that learning in which the learner, together with relevant others, can make the decisions necessary to meet their own learning needs. This definition implies that the learner is operating within the confines of behavior acceptable to society and is using appropriate, relevant resources to assist in the decision-making process. This definition describes a situation where learners are self-motivated, self-directed individuals who willingly and appropriately use the resources (both human and nonhuman) available to them to make decisions and take actions dealing with their own learning (Kesten, 1987, p. 10).

Self-direction

Self-direction in learning describes an attitude to learning "where the learner takes responsibility for his learning but does not necessarily carry out courses of action independently in connection with it" (Dickinson, 987, pp. 11-12). Based on this definition, learners accept control, but they do not know how to work alone. Although they may be able and willing, learners might need professional assistance to set goals and track progress.

Self-regulation

Self-regulated learning is an integrated and fruitful process created by learners that involves managing their metacognition, motivation, and behaviors to pursue a certain set of goals within a given setting. This resonates with Zimmerman (1989), who suggests that self-regulated learning implies the regulation of control over human and material resources, motivational beliefs, and a range of cognitive learning procedures. Within the context of

language learning, learner autonomy was described by Benson and Voller (1997) as the capacity to assume individual or self-regulated responsibility for one's own learning.

The study

Research participants and context

Two fourth-year undergraduates from the university's BA in English Language Teaching who had already completed BA courses on topics such as theories, approaches and language teaching methods, as well as on teaching practice, were invited to take part in this research project. On accepting, they were asked to take charge of both designing a non-compulsory English course for lower secondary school learners young learners aged 12-14 years, based on the principles and practices of autonomous learning, as well as with preparing the necessary materials to teach the lessons.

They gained access to classes with pupils ages 12 to 14 at a local secondary school located in a rural area of Western Mexico and offered them the opportunity to take a free face-to-face English course. The course was to be held on the premises of a the local public cultural and leisure center. The 40-hour course was to be delivered through weekly two-hour sessions from September through December, and, although 30 pupils enrolled, only ten of these attended regularly. A diagnostic test was administered at the beginning of the course, the results of which placed pupils at false beginner level.

For the purposes of this project, the teacher trainees were mentored by a teacher trainer specializing in the field of autonomous language teaching who helped them better tackle the process of preparing and teaching the language lessons. The professor's job was initially to review the theoretical and practical principles of autonomous language teaching with the student teachers. Before the beginning of, and throughout the free English course, he met the teacher trainees to plan their lessons and discuss their classes, based on their reflections on autonomous learning, as recorded in their teaching journals.

The research problem

The literature review provides definitions of autonomy and other terms that are simultaneously used. It also explains several other concepts associated with autonomy. Clarification of what all these autonomy-related concepts mean and establishing similarities and differences between and among them could result in a deeper understanding of learner

autonomy and all its ramifications for teacher trainers and trainees in the research context and beyond.

Therefore, this study addresses the problem of discovering what attributes of autonomous learning (and other terms used synonymously to signify autonomy) were observed and described during the English learning process of the secondary school pupils who volunteered to take the free English course, according to what was reported by the teacher trainees in their research journals. Despite being a small, limited qualitative study, the goal of the research is not to generalize or make assertions beyond this context, but it may inspire other studies in the researcher's contexts and significantly advance the conversation about the characteristics of autonomous learning that can be identified during the English learning process.

Research questions

The aim of this study resulted in the formulation of the research questions given below, which formed a guide to the study. According to the trainee teachers' teaching journals:

> What features of autonomy were observed in the lower secondary school pupils' English learning process?

The question above aims to explore the teacher-trainees' perceptions of examples of autonomous learning in their pupils. This will reveal how far they have been able to identify them as part of their pupils' learning process. Though as a small, bounded qualitative study, the aim of the research is not to generalize or make claims beyond this setting, it may stimulate similar research into the researcher´s contexts and add substantially to the discussion of what attributes of autonomous learning can be characterized during the English learning process.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods such as case studies are widely used in social and applied research for a variety of reasons. They offer a single set of boundaries for the study since they concentrate research efforts on a single example or location. This can make the study more manageable by minimizing travel, facilitating access, and lowering expenses. Case studies aim to create comprehensive understandings at a more strategic level by fostering

rapport and trust. Their goal is truthfulness and an understanding that is richer and deeper than is typically feasible in large-scale survey research (O'Leary, 2004).

The group of qualities and the progression of occurrences of this case, as well as the achievement of a deeper understanding or perspective of autonomous learning are the key drivers underlying this study which aims to enhance knowledge of autonomous learning, within a real-life context, by examining the phenomenon in a natural environment from the perspective of two teacher trainees (Stake, 1995; Rebolj, 2013).

Research journal

As Creswell (2013) notes, journaling is a popular data collection method in case studies. Keeping a journal for each of the English lessons allowed teacher trainees to make note of any individual changes in pupils (individually and/or as a group) as the study took place. It also allowed them to make assumptions on aspects of the autonomous learning process, such as learner reactions.

The advantage of keeping a research journal was that it assisted the trainees in developing greater self-awareness, enhanced comprehension of their own behavior, and the reactions of the pupils to a course which had been designed following principles and practices of autonomous learning. (Cobin and Straus, 2015). It also allowed the researcher access to the thoughts, dilemmas, conflicts, theories or implicit models that modelled the teacher trainees' performance (Sandín Esteban, 2003).

The data analysis process

The data analysis was carried out using the Atlas.ti software, which allows managing, coding and publishing qualitative research data. The first step of the analysis was data reduction (O'Dwyer, 2004), which consisted of a detailed reading of the journal responses and the narrowing down to the most relevant data, namely, examples of autonomous learning in the pupils.

The purpose of journals was for the researcher to identify characteristics of autonomous learning during the English learning process. Therefore, the coding process focused on identifying and coding their different assumptions. Once an initial coding scheme was created, all transcripts were read and analyzed again (Charmaz, 2014). As per Denzin and

Lincoln (2012), this process of rereading and analyzing facilitates the analysis of the findings, which resulted in a final version of 12 codes (Cobin and Strauss, 2015, p. 66).

Findings

The result of the analysis of the research journals shows that throughout the 40 hours of the English course, teacher trainees observed a number of different attitudes and behaviors related to autonomous learning. The findings are presented through a figure that shows the co-occurrences between the different codes. The numbers of the x-axis represent the frequency in which the codes co-occur. The co-occurrence of the codes was classified under seven headings: *First steps towards autonomy, Pupils make choices to fulfil their needs, The development of autonomous learning is promoted from the environment, The development of autonomous learning is promoted from the environment, Offering alternatives during the learning process fosters autonomy, Making rationally informed decisions fosters autonomous learning and Making responsible decisions promotes autonomous learning.*
The description of Figure 1 is followed by groups of quotes from the data, which support and strengthen the information presented therein. The quotes were taken from the journals and are associated to the codes.

Traits of autonomy and other terms used simultaneously

Part of what was evidenced in the journals shows actions and behaviors coded with keywords that make it possible to infer that the pupils displayed traits of autonomy. Figure 1, below, shows the co-occurrences of the codes used to notice the actions and behaviors associated to autonomous learning.

Figure 1. Code co-occurrence chart
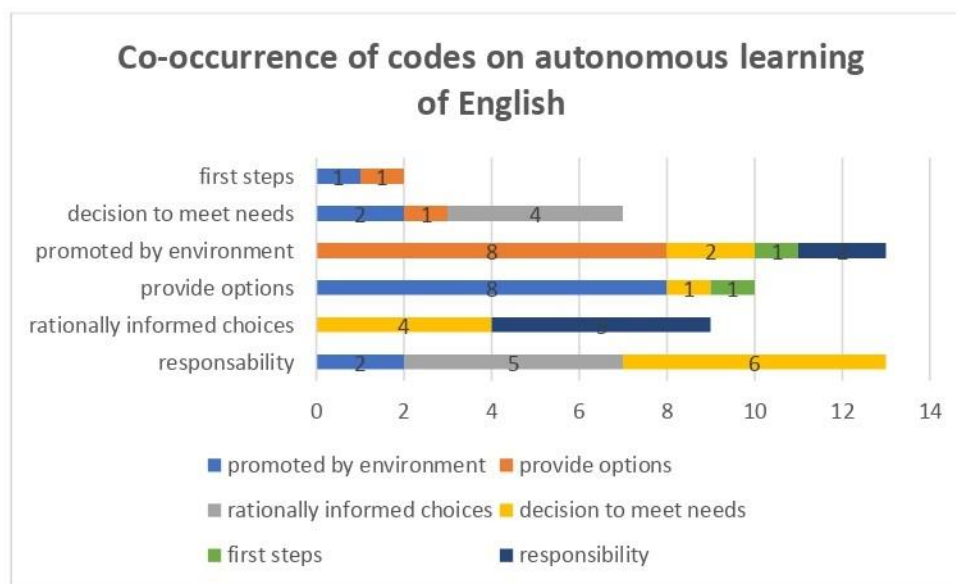
Source: self-made

First steps towards autonomy. One of the first observable actions described by teacher trainees was that pupils began to take their first steps towards autonomy. Figure 1 reveals the relationship between the promotion of autonomous learning and the first steps taken by pupils in that direction. Even though the code 'first steps' co-occurs only once with the codes 'promoted by environment' and 'provide options', there is a connection between them.

Pupils make choices to fulfil their needs. An additional behavior noted in the journals was the pupils' decision-making concerning their preferred language learning activities. The above figure shows that 'decision to meet needs' co-occurs twice with 'promoted by environment', once with 'provide options', four times with 'rationally informed choices' and six times with 'responsibility'.

The development of autonomous learning is promoted from the environment. Another distinctive aspect that stands out in the discourse of the journals is the environment. It is evident that an environment conducive to learning and to the promotion of autonomous learning enhances learners' abilities. The co-occurrences of this code make it clear. The figure above illustrates that 'promoted by environment' co-occurs eight times with 'provide options', twice with 'decision to meet needs', once with 'first steps' and twice with 'responsibility'.

Offering alternatives during the learning process fosters autonomy. Another aspect linked to a favorable environment for the development of autonomy is the strategy of providing options. The evidence shows that this strategy is key to approaching autonomy. Figure 1

proves that the code provide options co-occurs eight times with 'promoted by environment', once with 'decision to meet needs' and 'first steps'.

Making rationally informed decisions fosters autonomous learning. The promotion of autonomy through strategies such as providing learning options and fostering learning environments that enhance it have been highlighted. On the other hand, decision-making and student initiative are undoubtedly other determining factors for the development of autonomous learning. The figure clearly shows that the code 'rationally informed choices' co-occurs four times with 'decision to meet needs' and five occasions with 'responsibility'.

Making responsible decisions promotes autonomous learning. It has already been said before that pupils' decision-making and initiative is a determining factor for the development of autonomous learning. The information labeled with the 'responsibility' code supports this claim. Accepting responsibility for their own learning will bring pupils ever closer to the full development of autonomy. The occurrence of the codes clearly shows how assuming responsibility for learning is accompanied by 'rationally informed choices'; these codes co-occur five times. The 'responsibility' code also occurs twice with the code 'promoted by environment' and six times with 'decision to meet needs'.

Features of autonomy distinguished in the young pupils' English learning process

The data presented in the previous section shows the co-occurrence of the codes. This explains the relationship between various aspects of autonomous learning observed in pupils. Next, some of the most relevant journal quotes that show student traits regarding autonomous learning are presented in Table 1 the quotes are connected to the codes shown in the previous figure.

Table 1. First steps towards autonomy

Initial strategies to autonomy	
Code	Quotations
First steps	*they already have the freedom to select what activities to do during their independent Personal Language Improvement work and several of them seem to be taking advantage of it and enjoying it*
	They tell us that it is difficult for them and sometimes they get exasperated because they do not understand the language, but they are interested
	However, they have only done the assigned/selected work, ie, the 'Personal Language Improvement' activity
	only some of the pupils said they had done it of their own free will, additionally to what was assigned

Source: self-made

In the search for autonomy, it is imperative to go through processes that lead individuals through various situations that make them understand, internalize, and develop traits of autonomous learning. The quotes above refer to those first approaches the pupils have made. These first approximations could not be understood without the encouragement and work of the teacher trainees through the preparation of activities, their motivation and encouragement towards the pupils. Especially when their learning language background was of a teacher-centered approach. The Table 2 presents some evidence of teacher support.

Table 2. The first decisions to achieve goals

The initial choices to accomplish objectives	
Code	Quotations
Decision to meet needs	*they have shown more interest in choosing the activities that are most appropriate for them to develop*
	now we see that individually they already choose what they think will be easier for them, will serve them more or they will enjoy doing more
	some are trying to watch in English the shows they regularly watch in Spanish
	the majority referred to watching shows in English as a study strategy in addition to the work in class.

Source: self-made

The quotes presented above show the pupils' approach to autonomy. This is connected, in all the quotes, to the need to meet learning needs. Again, the preparation, support, and scaffolding provided by the teacher trainees represents a strategic aspect for the development of autonomy for language learning. The Table 3 shows some data of the importance of environment in the motivation to learn.

Table 3. Autonomy afforded by the environment

	Environment-provided autonomy
Code	Quotations
Promoted by environment	*Those who finished the activities first wanted to do extra work and we offered them options, one of which was to try to create a conversation with a partner and share activities from their day to day, using the Present Simple*
	Yes, we present them with the options, we explain each one and they decide which one to do, which one to take for homework and if they want to do one in a group or as a team
	Because we have already had two previous sessions in which we have mentioned the different sources and strategies that they can use, two pupils reported having started to use reading books
	We try to motivate them to do it, and many of them are already looking for or trying to do something to learn vocabulary, like listening to music, which is what most of them have been doing
	we always give them different options and material and they can choose what to use and how to use it

Source: self-made

The content of this section is essential in the development of an autonomous thought and attitude. The promotion of autonomy through the planning and execution of lesson plans, and all the other elements that are developed around it, becomes a fundamental pillar. The first steps, decisions, choice of resources, activities, initiative, decision-making, motivation are all permeated and supported by the creation of an environment that fosters autonomy. The information presented in Table 4 pertains to decisions made with knowledge.

Table 4. Decisions made with knowledge

	Choices based on understanding
Code	Quotations
Rationally informed choices	*but now we see that individually they already choose what they think will be easier for them, it will serve them more or they will enjoy more*
	Some are trying to watch the programs they regularly watch in English, even for a moment because it is difficult for them, but they are trying anyway
	Today at least five pupils reported using different strategies outside of the class hours. The majority referred to watching shows in English as a study strategy in addition to class
	they choose their Personal Language Improvement (PLI) activity according to the skill they consider they need to improve

Source: self-made

It is inferred from the journal quotes that as time went on, behavior and decision making changed. It can be interpreted that the mindset and decisions became more and more like what conceptual definitions meant by autonomous learning. It is assumed that, on the one hand, decisions depended on the pupils, and on the other, they were made based on previous

knowledge or experience they had gained. Table 5 displays some information regarding their involvement in their learning options.

Table 5. Involvement in their learning choices

Participation in their learning decisions	
Code	Quotations
Responsibility	*but for the first time the majority wanted to do all the activities willingly*
	We notice that even if the progress is very little, they are aware of doing something extra on their own and they decide how much effort they put into it
	Pupils are already more used to making the choice of activities
	They were very active to show their decision, and in the end the choice of activities was entirely the group's decision
	For example, there were those who watched movies on Netflix, in other cases they chose and analyzed a song in English
	In this class, most of the pupils reported having used some extra resources

Source: self-made

The statements shown above evoke behavioral and personality traits regarding language learning. It presents people who have decided to take responsibility for their own learning. It is a positive sign pointing to decisions on autonomous learning.

Discussion

The educational background of the pupils, and their experience in learning the English language prior to their participation in the free English lessons was with a teacher-centered approach rather than one focused on learner autonomy. In addition to this, they had never been trained in the use of strategies that would guide them towards the development of autonomous learning. All this could explain the pupil's initial passive attitude and their lack of decision-making about their own learning.

Hence, creating and sustaining an educational environment that encourages pupils to develop attitudes of autonomy, benefitted the development of independent attitudes and behaviors in these learners. This is confirmed by the information revealed in the research journals presented earlier. Reeve (2022) defines the use of the learning environment to support pupils´ autonomous learning as "student focus".

> A student focus means that the environment takes a real interest in the learner's ideas, preferences and goals, and that the environment is willing to bend its offerings to align with the learner's preferences. An understanding tone is an effort to understand what the learner wants, needs and prefers (p. 46).

The analysis of the journals shows that the environment was consciously prepared to promote the development of autonomous English learning. It was a successful strategy to sow seeds to develop essential characteristics of autonomous learning in pupils. This agrees with what Ryan & Deci (2017) affirm about autonomy, claiming that it is a source of motivation that, when promoted by environmental factors, is fully capable of energizing pupils' pursuit of interests, interest-driven challenges, learning, volitional internalizations, and engagement with possible learning chances.

In short, the conscious preparation of an environment to foster the development of autonomy became an effective strategy that permeated the development of attitudes and decision-making in the context of this study. It is the starting point of the construction of a bridge between the "…learning environments that support and are responsive to the learner's inputs and initiatives [and] the learner's willingness to take ownership over his or her own learning" (Reeve, 2022, p. 43). On the other side of the bridge is the desire to take responsibility for one's own learning driven by pupils´ initiative to modify and improve their conditions. Under these new circumstances, pupils assume a role of agents, someone who deliberately alters their environment (Bandura, 2006). This implies that they deliberately affect their surroundings and positive contribute and reshape the environments in which they learn and mature. Pupils become more capable of improving their lives by altering, enhancing, and negotiating with the circumstances in which they develop and learn (Reeve, 2022).

The information from the journals shows pupil initiatives that announce their interest in modifying and improving their conditions. The observed behaviors can be related to the concepts and definitions presented earlier. For instance, a clear evidence characteristics related to autonomy observed in the actions of the pupils can be associated with responsibility. Macaro (1997) explains that autonomy is:

> …an ability to recognize the value of taking responsibility for one's own objectives, content, progress, method and techniques of learning. It is also an ability to be responsible for the pace and rhythm of learning and the evaluation of the learning process (p. 168).

As mentioned above, Holec is cited at the outset of several reports on studies on learning autonomy. His often-referenced explanation of learner autonomy is connected to responsibility, too. Holec argues that learner autonomy refers "…to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning…" (p. 3).

The idea of responsibility is also related to independent learning, self-regulation and self-direction. Williams (2003) defines independent learning as a process in which pupils make responsible decisions and take appropriate actions with reference to their own learning. Benson and Voller (1997) identifies self-regulation as the capacity to assume individual or self-regulated responsibility for one's own learning. Additionally, Dickinson (1987) argues that self-direction in learning describes an attitude to learning," …where the learner accepts responsibility for his learning…" (pp. 11-12).

One more quality of autonomous learning is that learners can make decisions based on information, on previous learning experiences and on the use of strategies that help them make choices with greater assurance. This resonates with Jimenez Raya & Viera's (2015) assertion that: "… autonomy is about making rationally informed choices; thus, for autonomy to be developed as an educational aim, the pupils have to cultivate various forms of rationality and acquire basic knowledge" (p. 18-19). As revealed in the journal, pupils made decisions based on prior information, and this allowed them to improve their way of doing things and the situation (Reeve, 2013).

Conclusions

An essential quality in the search for knowledge is the learner's desire to accept responsibility for his or her own learning. Assuming responsibility, in whole or in part, for the development of learning is something that is regularly related to autonomy. The consolidation of the autonomous learning process could be conveyed to benefits for the student. For instance, learning should be more targeted and purposeful to increase its effectiveness both in the present and in the future. Some of the obstacles between learning and living resulting from teacher-centered learning should not arise. The ability to act autonomously could be transferred to other areas of daily life, making learners more useful members of society and more effective participants in the democratic process.

Data from this study shed light on the relevance of both fostering an environment and employing strategies that facilitate learners' movement towards a gradual development of autonomous learning. In addition to that, it was shown that well-coordinated work involving adequate teaching preparation and featuring both theoretical and practical knowledge of learner autonomy allow both individuals and groups to draw nearer to the meeting of their

goals. Thus, this study made it possible to understand that autonomy is a path to be trodden, rather than a person's natural state.

Further research

The data also shed light on potential new lines of research. For instance, it would be interesting to investigate the degree of autonomy a person can develop as they engage in a language learning process. That is, how autonomous can a person become during said process? How can degrees of autonomy be defined and described? What degree of autonomy can be observed?

On another hand, there are two factors that come together in the dimension of autonomy. The first is the intrinsic desire all people have of meeting a goal, while the second comprises the extrinsic conditions an individual navigates as they seek to meet a goal. It would be interesting to understand, first, how these two elements play a part in the construction of autonomy as distinct factors of the equation, and then, to explore whether they at some point come together as one, that is to say, in the achievement of autonomy.

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