Profiles of Autonomy in the Field of Foreign Languages

Perfiles de autonomía en el campo de las lenguas extranjeras

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This paper describes the characteristics of the autonomous learner, especially in the foreign language classroom and identifies the most common profiles observed in a particular group of students training to be teachers at the University of Pamplona. Structured observations, questionnaires and interviews were used as data collection techniques.

The study reported on this paper takes its source from the research, "La autonomía en el proceso de aprendizaje del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Un estudio de perfiles y prácticas de estudiantes y profesores"* , undertaken by the Grupo Interinstitucional de Evaluación e Investigación (GIEI), which consisted of six teachers from various universities in Colombia. It reports on the study carried out at one of the participating universities.

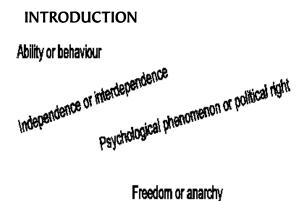**Key words**: Autonomy, autonomous learning, profile, behavior, autonomous learner

El presente artículo considera el perfil que caracteriza al aprendiz autónomo a la luz del concepto de autonomía en el aula de lenguas extranjeras y describe los perfiles identificados en un grupo de futuros profesores observados en la Universidad de Pamplona. Para la recolección de datos se emplearon observaciones, cuestionarios y entrevistas.

El estudio que aquí se reporta nace de la investigación "La Autonomía en el Proceso de Aprendizaje del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera: Un estudio de perfiles y prácticas de estudiantes y profesores", realizado por el Grupo Interinstitucional de Evaluación e Investigación (GIEI), integrado por seis docentes de diversas universidades de Colombia. Este texto reporta el estudio realizado en una de las universidades participantes.

Palabras claves: Autonomía, Aprendizaje Autónomo, Perfil, Comportamiento, Aprendiz Autónomo

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INTRODUCTION

Ability or behaviour

Independence or interdependence

Psychological phenomenon or political right

Freedom or anarchy

Responsibility or control

Autonomy in foreign languages is considered an important component for creative development in communication, moving away from conventional and restrictive contexts and moving towards self-direction and self-regulation where the individuals reorganize, restructure and evaluate their learning experience. The introduction of these new contexts encourages them "to become authors of their own worlds"' (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 53).

The concept of autonomy in the field of language learning has been understood from the outset as self-learning and, in the classroom, as the gradual transfer of the learning process from the teacher to the students. Self- learning centers attention on the individual and on independence. Nevertheless, developed independence through autonomy is conditioned to interdependence; this being one of the characteristics of social beings. Autonomy, therefore, may be understood as freedom of control, not only of the teacher, but also of the curriculum; the preconceived ideas of learning a new language and the students' weaknesses. Then, the process of transfer presupposes the development of an active relationship among the learner, the process and the content of learning in the way in which he/she learns and the way in which he/she transfers this learning to contexts outside the classroom (Little, 1991), thus, "empowering" the learner to be confident in new surroundings.

Interpretations of autonomy presented by different authors and researchers, Leguthke & Thomas (1991),

Little (1991), Holec (1992), Dickinson (1992), Nunan (1997) Benson y Voller (1997), Pennycook (1997), Cotterall & Crabbe (1999), Zimmerman (2000), Benson (2001), consider that the existence of tendencies, procedures and behaviors evidence a series of characteristics that help us to identify autonomous individuals.

The following list states the characteristics that define the autonomous learner:

• Regularly participates in the definition of the objectives, understands the purpose of the task and influences the content and structure of the program

• Shows responsibility and initiative in the development of pre-planned actions.

• Collaborates in the orientation of work and with those who form a collective with learning preferences.

• Systematically reviews the agenda, reflects on what has already been learnt, evaluates effect, develops and uses self-evaluative criteria.

• Self- regulates his/her interaction with other participants and the proper employment of resources.

• Maintains a positive attitude and behavior despite possible learning difficulties and manages to generate high levels of motivation.

• Uses a series of strategies through which he/she achieves a more spontaneous and effective degree of communication. Easily handles different roles in discussion and enjoys a high level of social autonomy in his/her learning.

• Successfully transfers what has been learnt to new contexts.

• Is conscious of challenges and reflects upon his/her own contributions.

• Has a positive image of him/herself, is creative and disciplined.

• Undertakes and develops investigative processes.

• Enjoys activities that favor social interaction.

• Regards the teacher as a guide; prefers individual tasks, tutorials and distance/ off-campus learning.

CONTEXT

The University of Pamplona is valued for its position in one of the boader zones of the country (Colombia/Venezuela), where it has become an axis, not only in education, but also in economic matters.

For this study, a group of four students was selected, one female and three males (age range from 18 to 21), as a representative sample. They were fifth semester students in the undergraduate program in foreign languages at the University of Pamplona. These students were in their fifth semester of English and attended six class hours of English a week (four hours in the classroom and two in the language lab).

RESEARCH METHOD

The four students were invited to participate in this study as part of their regular English classes. They agreed and gave permission to use the data. During a period of nine weeks, data were collected through structured observations, questionnaires and individual interviews in Spanish that were conducted by the end of the second and the ninth weeks. Classroom observations were recorded and transcribed as well as the interviews. The terms E1, E2, E3 and E4 were used instead of the students' real names.

Data analysis consisted of searching for specific behaviors and characteristics orientated towards the analysis of autonomy in the classroom with future teachers of foreign languages. Special attention was paid to emerging patterns used to construct the final profiles.

It is necessary to consider that to evaluate what is observed and heard from a student, in a particular situation and context, is a complex process. He/She will show not only the impact of that particular situation and / or context, but also the effect of some individual factors, such as past experiences, preferences, tendencies and habits which may determine the learning of a new language.

RESULTS

The four profiles presented below contain the main features of each of the students, identified with an image that resembles the observed behaviors:

The Searcher

This individual is responsible, collaborative, happy, sociable, punctual, spontaneous and pleasant with those who share his/her day. He/she is known for wanting to succeed and normally brings the necessary materials to the classroom.

The searcher associates autonomy with people he/she perceives to be extroverted, those who participate, those who are dedicated and responsible and those who enjoy the experience. "*It is what each person has and shows … in a situation*". He/she spends time among academic, extracurricular and sporting activities, the latter being one of the favorites and resolves his/her own personal and academic problems responsibly.

This student involves him/herself in decision-making regarding to the design of the program, selection of topics and demonstration of knowledge. He/she also takes the role of teacher with people who have a lower level of understanding with the aim of explaining, clarifying, reminding and learning at the same time. He/she prefers to work in small groups or individually.

As far as learning strategies go, The Searcher takes notes, clarifies instructions, asks questions, uses the dictionary and main text, audio and bibliographical resources as well as personal help. He/she shows concern and a desire to improve oral communication. This is evident when he/she repeats things to him/herself in the continual search and inquiry into effective strategies and in the questions he/she poses to the teacher and fellow students. "*It is fundamental to know the strategies in time to have good work habits … to reach autonomy successfully*". He/she makes efforts to communicate in the foreign language, seldom using long utterances in English, but enjoying the learning experience nevertheless and undaunted by potential mistakes. "*I don't get embarrassed; if I*

make a mistake, I don't care…I learn from my mistakes…to see how I can improve [*my language skills*]. *I think challenge is the best thing*". He/she corrects him/herself and evaluates his/her listening comprehension skills, compares answers and detects strengths and weaknesses. "*I use tests. I transcribe everything I hear. Later, to see if I've done O.k., I look at the book and compare … the writing … to see if I have made any mistakes with words or expressions*". This student is aware of the competence needed for his/her professional future, goes to the resource center daily and uses it as a place of study and practice.

This subject has a high level of interest in learning and prefers discussion which is orientated towards debate, workshops, etc. which generate opportunities for social interaction. He/she assigns a traditional role to the teacher; that is to say, giving explanations, encouraging participation, motivating, giving constructive feedback, correcting and evaluating.

The Motivated But Unreliable

This student is an extrovert, open in dialogue and not punctual although he/she has the potential to take control in activities which, by and large, he/she avoids. He/she doesn't show much interest in the classroom and only contributes moderately during periods of interaction, but is attracted by the opportunity to learn new languages, by music and by the Internet.

His/her concept of autonomy lies in initiative, research and the establishment of challenges. "*…to want to do…to know what for….to have set challenges, if he/she doesn't have them, then … for what reason does he do things?*" This subject knows his/her own responsibilities but punctuality is not one of his/her main practices. Neither is time management, particularly when it comes to completion of academic tasks. "*I know I arrive late … I try to be more punctual but sometimes other things get in the way*".

As far as learning strategies are concerned, The Motivated but Unreliable takes notes when he/she feels like it, uses the dictionary and collaborates a

little in group activities, shows a preference for individual work and is easily distracted. "*I don't have a work group. I prefer to work alone … sometimes I find it difficult to concentrate*". He/she uses short fixed expressions most of the time when conversing with the teacher and speaks in the mother tongue when working in groups and prefers development of written communication. This student does not keep records of his/her own pattern of learning, nor does he/she demonstrate a capacity for self-correction or self-evaluation. He/she frequently uses the technological resources of the Institution, preferring to work selectively and to learn individually. "*I go to the Internet almost everyday, it's great…I learn a lot with the computer*". He/she uses the resource center as a place to socialize more than a place for study and research, creates his/her own private space and expresses interest in working at home.

The Motivated but Unreliable concentrates on the teacher, the design, the content, the development of the course and the protagonism of the learning process in the classroom. He/she emphasizes the role of authority, describing the teacher as "*the power of the story*".

The Wind Up Doll

This student is a quiet, punctual, timid, reserved and perceptive person. His/her passive personality means that he/she is sometimes lacking in initiative. The practical tasks in the classroom depend on the study group and the teacher.

This character considers autonomous learning to be "*the freedom to do things*" and describes the autonomous learner as "*responsible, disciplined, interested, conscious of what needs to be learnt and known, and capable of research in order to realize his/her own goals, to self-qualify and self-evaluate*". The Wind Up Doll associates autonomy with an individualized style of work, seldom in a group, believing that sometimes he/she lacks autonomy. This can be seen in his/her style of learning. "*… most of the time I'm with my friends so…I study, learn and work with them*".

He/she "mentally" plans work and tasks to achieve academic success with short term aims.

He/she does not take notes when asked not to, uses the dictionary often, replies in a quiet voice, repeats to him/herself what he/she has heard and prefers to learn by reading. "*I read about the culture of Great Britain… I take down expressions and vocabulary. I study verbal forms which I write in my notebook to remember*". When it comes to group work, he/she collaborates by formulating questions and carrying forward ideas that contribute to the development of the activities. Although he/she believes that "*when the teacher points out someone to participate, it is like a demand*". Generally, he/she hopes to be picked, speaks monosyllabically, smiles and shows him/herself to be well-informed. He/she shows a preference for audio information, likes listening to others and goes to the resource center often with his/her work companions on whom he/she depends academically and socially.

This subject is conscious of his/her weaknesses in interactive processes, is aware of what is needed for active participation and considers self-evaluation necessary, with the aim of improving his/her level of learning. He/she is concerned about the image he/she projects and about what other people think about him/her. "*A mark is the least of my concerns… it does not affect me on a personal level, but on a social level. I am talking about… when another person sees the mark and says something like 'this student is mediocre' ''*.

The Wind Up Doll's role is to learn and act "*like the beat of the music*" (Betancur, 2001:21), influenced by the teacher and the work group. He/she believes that the teacher must share the benefit of experience, promote interactive processes and serve as a guide "*… so that we use well what we have learnt*".

The Brain

This is a responsible, active, extroverted, reflexive, collaborative, sociable, secure, and punctual student who is organized in his/her private life as well as academic life.

He/she always has the relevant materials and is especially adept when it comes to leading processes of interaction in the classroom.

This student relates the concept of autonomous learning to initiative, responsibility and investigation. "*I always have to be very responsible… it is gratifying. To be responsible is like being independent*". He/she has a natural ability for organizing time and completing the different weekly personal and academic tasks. "*I have a timetable for everything, including when I get up and go to bed. I sometimes read before going to sleep so that I have time to do my university stuff as well as things for the congregation… I dedicate seventy hours every month to religious activities, but I have… an agenda. When I receive the timetable from the University, I take the hours I am not going to be in class into account… I balance my religious practices well with my university responsibilities*". He/she prefers to participate in the design of the program, in the selection and development of the content and enjoys working in small groups with others who share a similar level of communicative competence.

As far as learning skills go, The Brain takes notes, draws conclusions, uses resources like the dictionary and main text, carries ideas forward, formulates questions, gives answers, expresses opinions and never refuses to work with fellow students. He/she participates voluntarily in classroom tasks, displays confidence and independence and does not need constant attention from the teacher. This subject goes to the resource center every day to study and practice, to read texts or short stories, to consult grammar books, to use listening material, to listen to music and to write it down. He/she likes to monitor his/her progress when possible and evaluates his/her up - to- date performance in verbal communication, comparing it with past levels and reflecting on his/her progress. "*I consider that as time goes by, one should evaluate oneself. I have had the opportunity to listen to recordings of myself when I was at a basic level and I have compared*

them with what I am doing at the moment. I read texts and ask and answer questions about them; self-evaluation, for me, is reading something and being able to recount what I have read". The Brain detects the strengths and weaknesses in learning strategies and tries new techniques (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-reflection and self-correction allow him/her to understand how to study and work better. His/her personal confidence helps in the transfer of what has been learnt to new contexts. He/she is highly motivated and always communicates in the foreign language but uses long expressions only on some occasions. This character grants the teacher the role of tutor and guide and considers him/herself autonomous in areas in which he/she is more motivated, but recognizes that there are circumstances when help is needed.

As can be seen in the previously mentioned cases, it is possible to identify characteristics that draw some students closer and distance others from the autonomous learning process. The Searcher shows behavior that tends to favor the development of autonomy in an educational context. The Motivated But Unreliable, on the contrary, creates his/her own opportunities for self-learning outside the classroom, moving away from the responsibility and capacity to act as part of the interdependent social group. The Wind Up Doll shows a tendency to make him/herself popular in the foreign languages classroom, but does not possess characteristics that indicate a level of autonomy. Finally, The Brain is a student who, due to his/her learning behavior, comes closer to achieving the autonomous learning profile, showing an initial level of autonomy and self-regulation and using important strategies for reflection on the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

The practical analysis of autonomy in the classroom of future teachers of foreign languages shows that the majority of students fall into the profile of "The Wind Up Doll". This group follows the established rules and procedures, the

instructions for the completion of tasks and does the necessary work on the set texts. They prefer group activities and detailed text analysis, but have a lack of flexibility when it comes to ideas and consider the teacher or group leader as essential for achieving a successful level of learning. Their contribution and participation in the classroom are subject to "the wind up mechanism". This mechanism is initiated by the teacher through the type of input provided, the teaching and learning strategies applied and the resources used in the language learning process. Students classified within this profile depend on those who around them. These students only "dance" when they are asked to.

The classroom is perceived as one of the fundamental areas for gaining autonomy in the context of foreign language learning. It is there where the process of autonomy may be understood. Teacher autonomy is considered a necessary condition for the development of learner autonomy, which permits him/her to be the author of his/her own learning, to maximize his/her individual potential and to become a successful performer in new surroundings.

Moving away from "The Wind Up Doll" profile to more autonomous profiles should be the focus of foreign language teachers. This means, to center their attention on the practices of more effective learner roles, giving them new opportunities to exercise control over their own learning, to acquire new responsibilities, and to get actively involved in the management of their learning process. All these practices may lead the different roles for learners from that as negotiators, and users of lifelong learning strategies to risk – takers and innovators.

The role of learners as negotiators emerges from themselves, the learning process and the object of learning. According to Nunan, (1999), it involves, negotiation over the following issues: whether to work in groups or pairs for a particular task, how long a series of group reports should go on, whether a particular writing task should be done in or out of class, whether a series of reflection

tasks should be completed every week or every two weeks, when the visit to the resource center should happen, etc.

The use of learning strategies from the start of the learning process helps learners to be directors of their own learning, to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning tasks. Learners are expected to create their own space according to their goals, needs and processes of adjustment and adaptation of individual characteristics in new contexts. They are expected to make use of a significant level of reflection about the learning process. Reflection is an essential component in autonomy and reveals the differences among individuals, showing some to be more successful than others. Previous studies suggest that efficient learners tend to exhibit specific characteristics as they go about learning a second/foreign language. For example, they like to identify their strengths and weaknesses to work on language problems, to reflect on the processes underlying their learning and to find their own way as regards good language learners.

The role of risk–takers and innovators stems from the many tasks in which learners have to create and interpret messages. Practice in guessing from linguistic and contextual clues, asking for clarification, consulting, creating, interpreting and restating messages, paraphrasing, and using paralinguistic signals may be seen as motivating tasks to encourage learners to become more autonomous in their approach to language learning.

Therefore, autonomy seems to be rooted in these identities which are found in individuals as new learners. It is also part of the interactive process through which, with group collaboration, the shared learning space is constructed. Finally, to promote and educate people about autonomous learning within Colombia implies a pedagogic approach which focuses on specific socio-cultural needs in and out of the classroom. That is to say, pedagogic innovations which guide the participants –both students and teachers- to discover their needs and individual learning styles, using them to develop autonomy, tackle new learning strategies and to

enhance cognitive, social and reflective processes required in the learning of a new language. This leaves room for self-regulation and the transfer of knowledge, skills and actions from the classroom to new social and cultural areas.

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