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## **AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION**

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This paper summarizes the findings of a research project conducted on the development of autonomy in foreign language teaching programs in two Colombian universities. This project can be seen as an outcome of an overall project (COFE Project), supported by the British and Colombian governments in which twenty-six other universities participated. The aim of the COFE project was to improve the quality of pre-service English language teaching programs (Licenciaturas) by qualifying teacher educators and promoting learner autonomy through the donation of resource centers.

Autonomy may be regarded as a universal educational goal; however, it can be interpreted differently in different cultural contexts (Sinclair, 1997). Within the context of globalization and internationalization, the Colombian government has become aware of the importance of access and management of information in order to overcome underdevelopment and be able to compete in the international scene. Educational authorities consider the promotion of autonomy as one of the main goals to be achieved in all levels of education. The educational process should be based on real life, be holistic and focus on the development of each Individual's potential and talent. The student should develop the capacity to learn how to learn, to be creative, autonomous, critical and reflective. This implies a shift of emphasis from teacher-centered to learner-centered education, from transmission to construction of knowledge.

### **1. CONTEXT**

**B**oth universities are located in cities on the Andes central range and have similar cultural and ethnic roots. However, one city's development is centered on education and aims to be declared university district whereas the other city is reputed for being a motor for industrial and commercial development in the country. Universities differ in the following aspects:

University 1 Licenciatura	University 2 Licenciatura
Mostly non-working students	Mostly working students
Two hours of independent work in the Licenciatura.	No time provision for independent work in the Licenciatura.
Three teachers in the program attended updating course in Great Britain and most teachers were involved in the COFE Project.	Only one teacher attended updating course in Great Britain and very few teachers were involved in the COFE Project.
Punctuality, class attendance and bringing homework are highly valued and students are graded on these aspects.	Attendance is obligatory only in practical courses, not in theoretical ones. Students and teachers are lax regarding punctuality and bringing homework.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Benson & Voller (1997:1-2) present five different ways in which the word “autonomy” has been used in language education:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of learner’s responsibility for their own learning;
5. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

Interpretations of autonomy may focus on the individual dimensions of autonomy, which emphasize the development of strategies and techniques and the use of self-access centers (Pennycook, 1997), or on the social dimensions of it, which stress interaction and collaboration. On the other hand, autonomy may be considered as a means for improved learning or as an end of learning itself (Benson & Voller, 1997). Holding the latter view implies taking a political stance, which would involve empowering future teachers to be prepared to take a more active role as intellectuals and to participate in decision making in diverse areas of society.

Teacher educator’s views of autonomy will determine the areas of activity through which autonomy will be promoted in and outside the classroom. Aparicio et al (1994) and Benson (1997) mention the following:

- Learning through collaboration and group work rather than competition

and individual participation, and taking decisions collectively.

- Participating in the selection of content, activities and resources.
- Self- and peer-assessing
- Reflecting on their learning styles and strategies
- Exploring societal and personal learning goals
- Criticizing learning tasks and materials
- Self-producing tasks and materials
- Controlling the management of learning.

Since teachers tend to reproduce the models of teaching they have been exposed to, it is of crucial importance that teacher educators become aware of how their practices will influence the ones used by future teachers. Developing autonomous learners will depend on which of these areas of activity are taken into account by teacher educators.

### **AIMS**

The aims of this research were to explore to what extent autonomous learning had been developed in licenciatura programs, to explore practices and conceptualizations of language learners and teachers which enhance or hinder the development of autonomy, and to see if practices and students and teachers conceptualization of autonomy differ depending on the cultural contexts. More practical goals were to raise awareness in teacher educators and future teachers on how to enhance autonomy and to consider recommendations regarding developing autonomy.

### **3. METHOD**

In this multi-site case study, a group of fourth and fifth semester students and their teachers were observed at University 1 for two semesters, and two groups of students with their teachers at University 2 for one semester. In addition, two semi-structured interviews with students and three with teachers were conducted, and documents, such as policy statements and course programs, were analyzed. Through constant comparison of the data in each site, categories were developed, discussed in periodical meetings and the following eight recurrent themes were identified.

#### **• Concept of Autonomy**

Students viewed autonomous learners as those who participate in class and work outside the classroom, mainly with other classmates. There were

nuances, however, to this common idea. Less autonomous students considered autonomy as being responsible and working outside of class, doing homework assignments. Other more autonomous students viewed autonomous learners as those who go beyond class requirements, implement a critical approach, and make decisions on their own. At University 1 students believed autonomy also involved collaborating with peers and even with the teacher.

As regards to teachers, there was no shared concept of autonomy. Some considered it as students working in isolation, and some as students supporting their views and choosing the topic for their papers. Others, perhaps more progressive, considered autonomous learners as those who “take charge of (their) own learning\*\* (Holec, 1981), i.e. know how to learn and look for information and learning opportunities on their own.

### • **Role of the teacher**

Due to the deep-rooted tradition of teacher-centered classes in Colombia, students still viewed their teacher as a knowledge transmitter. Teachers are the ones who know, not just about their subject matter but about other topics, and “know how to transmit that knowledge”. (Student).

Students see the teacher as a key figure for students learning and assign him/her features that are characteristic of the role of a facilitator. Students viewed the teacher as the one who created the conditions for developing autonomy, especially in the beginning stages of acquisition, according to them, teachers should:

- encourage students to research and consult bibliographical resources
- motivate students to learn and participate in activities to be done in and out of class and promoting in students the desire to learn
- monitor students progress
- be friendly and entertaining (“amistoso y ameno”, [Student])

Although taking the role of facilitator implies a shift of power from teacher to students, in our universities teachers seemed to have increased their power since students expected them to be not only experts on the subject matter but also experts on the most effective strategies to learn the language (Voller, 1997). (“El profesor le dice a uno) usted tiene estas posibilidades, escoja la

que le guste, pero la mejor es ...STA”, (Students). At University 1 students also thought that the teacher should be a model for students and be trained to foster autonomy in students so that these students become autonomous teachers in the future.

In both universities, teachers manifested awareness of the new educational trends involving shifts in the paradigm from teacher as knowledge transmitter to teacher as a facilitator who promotes and motivates student’s learning processes and guides them towards achievement. On the other hand, teachers at University 2 thought that an autonomous teacher is one who “researches on his/her own practice” and “knows why he does what he does”. Thus, a new role teachers have to play if they want to promote autonomy in their students is to reflect on what they do and how they can improve their practice (Thavenius, 1999). Students at University 1 believe it is the teacher’s responsibility to create the proper conditions for students to learn how to learn and to become reflective in their practice.

#### • **Role of the student**

Students considered autonomous learners as those who participate in class, are responsible and work outside of class, which means doing homework assignments. Some students added that autonomous learners are those who go beyond class requirements and question teachers and students ideas. At University 1, students stressed that autonomy involves collaborating with peers and with the teacher, helping her with class management, and participating in class. (“Yo juego un papel muy importante porque el estudiante es el que hace la clase si participa” [Student]).

Besides participating in class and working out of class, teachers differ in their idea of the student’s role. One considered that autonomous students should work on their own without the teacher’s monitoring; another stated that they should support their views and choose the topic for their papers. Still others considered autonomous learners as those who are responsible for their own acquisition process and stressed the fact that students should use appropriate strategies for learning out of class.

#### • **Classroom interaction**

Teachers spent most of their class time explaining concepts or instructions and asking questions to promote student’s participation.

At University 1 despite the fact that teachers encouraged students to establish relationships between the content of the course and their own experience, and to make predictions and draw inferences, students rarely did this. If they did, they just responded by giving very brief answers. They also spent much of their time copying from the blackboard or their textbooks and taking notes about what the teacher said. At University 2 teachers insisted on students answering questions and supporting answers. More proficient students responded to the teacher's efforts questioning their classmates and even their teacher's statements, and supporting their own points of view more elaborately. In both universities, teachers in group work were almost unobtrusive and students seemed to see them as additional participants in class discussion.

### • **Collaboration**

Both students and teachers stressed the social dimension of autonomy. Students valued collaborative work with their peers because it contributed to their learning (Voller, 1997), and promoted responsibility toward one another. Students often worked in groups in and out of class. They also collaborated with their teacher, helping him/her with class management, and participating in class discussions.

Teachers, however, resented the fact that they seldom worked collegiately and collaboratively. They were concerned about the lack of opportunities to discuss the syllabus in academic meetings and to agree on teaching and assessing strategies. Full time teachers complained because committees did not have an academic agenda but an administrative one. Part time teachers, who are becoming the majority in our universities, complained because of the difficulties they have to attend those meetings.

### • **Responsibility**

In order for students to take charge of their own learning they have to be motivated. Those students whose goals encompassed more than just learning the language (Benson, 1997) and had the desire to become teachers, were more autonomous, went beyond the course requirements, looked for additional information and did not work just for a good grade. Most students did not see responsibility as accomplishing their own objectives, because either they did not set these objectives themselves or because they kept postponing doing what led to achievement. In our culture the concept of time is flexible and that of timeliness almost non-existent, This is why independent learning is problematic in our context. If the teacher takes a

distant stand and does not guide and check students periodically in their independent work, students will do, only until last minute pressure, what they had committed themselves to do.

- **Self-regulation**

All course programs proposed the development of some kind of metacognitive strategy; for example, students should reflect on their mistakes and self-correct, and monitor their own and their peers work.

In general, teachers dedicated class time to raise student's awareness on their learning process. One teacher dedicated various classes to discuss the process students used to solve a task and how to improve it, to reflect on the way they learned, and to give ideas on how to use resources and time.

More proficient students were aware of the objectives of the course and could state what they had learnt. When asked to self-assess they usually mentioned macro-skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Less advanced students depended on the teacher's grades to know how they were doing and when asked what they needed to improve they mentioned micro-skills such as grammar, spelling and vocabulary. However, students did not set their own learning goals or plan their learning, which are key issues in order to take charge of one's own learning (Boeckaerts, 1999).

- **Out of class work**

The range of strategies students used to learn the language was found to be extremely limited. Students tended to use strategies that address receptive skills, mainly listening, and did not look for opportunities for speaking or writing in English outside the classroom. Student's favorite activity was to watch videos and listen to songs in English. Most students just listened and tried to make sense of the movie or the song. Some took notes of new expressions or vocabulary, and one of them said she kept a notebook with the lyrics she had written of the songs she liked. Few students read in English for pleasure or to obtain information. Reading was seen mainly as a means to learn vocabulary; however, they just copied the word and its meaning, but they did not write examples or use it in other contexts. Thus, the meaning of the word was not internalized and ready for later use.

Contrary to what Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) found in a study on students response to specific training on the use of strategies, the teachers help seemed to be required for productive skills, but not for receptive ones, such



as listening. In our context, only the classroom offers the conditions to exercise oral skills. As for writing skills, students do not feel the need to practice them. Internet does give them the opportunity to write English, but not many have access to it. Practice writing becomes required with academic papers only in upper semesters, when students are about to graduate.

#### **4. Discussion**

The concept students and teachers have of an autonomous learner include some aspects mentioned by Benson and Voller (1997); however, classroom practices and out-of-class activities are not coherent with students' and teachers' beliefs. Thus, conflicts arise when students and teachers do not meet expectations they have of each other. Less autonomous students want the teacher to be a "knowledge machine" (máquina de conocimientos) and resent teachers who do not transmit knowledge but expect students to be active constructors of their own knowledge. These students expect the teacher to make decisions regarding their learning, while the teachers want students to take initiative, and not just respond to their requirements. On the other hand, autonomous students conflict with traditional teachers and criticize them for not engaging in research and working collaboratively.

If we follow classic beliefs theory which states that beliefs are determinants of attitudes, which are determinants of intentions (motivation), which are determinants of behavior (strategies), we could hope that beliefs will gradually lead to new behaviors. However, actions should be taken by the whole faculty, not just a few teachers, in order to expand teachers' and students' concept of autonomy and to take actions to fill the gap between beliefs and behavior. One teacher promoting autonomy cannot over-weigh students' lifelong beliefs and experience. That is why teachers should work in teams in order to discuss and hopefully agree on how to reach this aim, and students should start being involved in the process since the first semester. As one teacher stated, "The development of autonomy is a long-term process; you can't expect students to just be autonomous, you can encourage them towards autonomy by the systematic teaching of strategies that can help them to continue learning on their own, making them aware of resources, study skills, self assessment, reflection on strengths and weaknesses".

#### **5. Recommendations**

- Teachers should raise their awareness on the issues that are affecting the development of autonomy by reflecting on their own practices and the

reasons why students are not achieving the levels of autonomy expected.

- There has to be team work in order to reach consensus on practices that will be carried out by all, or at least, most teachers, so as to have an effect on the students.
- Students have to be taught to reflect on their own learning so as to develop the metacognitive knowledge that will permit them to determine their own objectives, choose materials for out-of-class work, decide how they will work, monitor the process followed and evaluate its effectiveness (Holec, 1981).
- Students should be engaged in decisions involving all the aspects of a course, such as objectives, content, methodology, and assessment.

Contrary to what may be happening in other countries, new educational policies in Colombia require each institution to devise its educational project taking into account its specific context. This empowers teachers, who have to be prepared to take new roles and participate in decision making in diverse areas. They are expected to participate in policy making, setting the aims and objectives of the institution, and in curriculum design, making decisions about the content and methodology of their subject matter in particular. Decisions which have usually been in the hands of educational management (Widdowson, 1983: 6-7 in Benson, 1997:26) are now in the hands of teachers. Are we preparing future teachers for this challenge?

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## **NOTAS SOBRE LAS AUTORAS**

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