Exploring autonomous learning strategies to deal with the students' independent work in EFL learning within the credit system

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry has to do with some informal procedures implemented in classroom research aimed to the identification of useful strategies to enhance the students' autonomous learning in English within the credit system at the Bachelor's Degree in Spanish, English and French at La Universidad de La Salle.

The ideas presented are just a compilation of starting points on a literature review done by a group of English teachers[1] who have voluntarily joined since last semester in order to share and discuss views, ideas and thoughts about students' independent learning.

The initiative of starting to implement a proposal in this area arises because the current tendencies of education are oriented to encourage the learners' capabilities to acquire knowledge on their own and to develop communicative, interactive and working competences which are going to be used in different fields of action they are regularly engaged.

Likewise, in the local context, and due to the policies stated by Colombian credit system it is also significant to put in action student-centered methodologies that promote new learning styles and help students recognize new ways of constructing knowledge, getting meaningful learning experiences, and learning independently both inside and outside the classroom.

As the topic autonomous learning entails a lot of theoretical issues, this study is focused to determine EFL learning strategies to fulfill the purposes above stated. The theoretical principles that empower us as teachers to reflect on our daily practice and in consequence to implement practical actions in favor of the students' independent learning are going to be revised.

Key Words: Autonomous learning, independent work, EFL learning strategies, cooperative work, self-evaluation strategies, portfolios, action research.

INTRODUCTION

As it has already been mentioned, this article compiles some key aspects for classroom research. They were proposed to the EFL teachers and students of the Teaching Program in English of La Universidad de La Salle in order to be analyzed, discussed, evaluated, adopted or adapted when the independent work, demanded by the credits system, may be implemented. Similarly, this article will only show partial results of the pedagogic actions piloted by two teachers who propose a set of strategies to the whole community of English teachers and particularly to those working under the parameters of the credit system.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

As the core topic of this study has its basis on the concepts of autonomy and it entails more than it is possible to cope with in this work, the concept of autonomy will be limited to the implementation of useful strategies in EFL learning as resources for the students to develop their language skills with the guidance of the teacher. Thus, it is deemed worthy to recall some considerations about it in the context of EFL learning. In Holec (1991) it is argued that both teachers and students need to know who they are, what they can expect from each other and what their respective attitudes towards the context of learning are. Thus, if teachers and students decide to engage themselves in autonomous learning they need to know what new responsibilities and duties they must assume as well as the expected degree of autonomy they are looking for.

Likewise, on the topic of autonomy and concerning the role of the participants in the learning process; Voller (1997) also states that being autonomous implies having responsibility for making decisions concerning a great deal of aspects of learning: determining objec-

tives, defining contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, evaluating what has been learnt and so on.

In a similar angle, Benson (1997), cited in Sierra and Frodden, estimates that from a psychological perspective, autonomy is defined as an internal capacity that allows the students to be progressively in charge of their learning.

Accordingly, from the above theoretical views, it would be pertinent to highlight the idea that promoting autonomy when learning a foreign language implies to take into account some important principles of constructivism such as negotiation and mediation among participants, the students' self regulation and awareness on their processes and that the teacher must be a guide and facilitator rather than an instructor. On the last concern, Little-Wood (1997) also adds that the role of the teacher is to help students develop the attitudes and aptitudes – motivation, self-confidence, knowledge and skills needed to learn more independently and to be more independent individuals.

After these general considerations on the subject of autonomy, this study will focus on AEBLI (1998), who provides some insights to be taken into account when generating autonomous learning in the classroom. In AEBLI (1998) encouraging autonomous learning entails as starting points to establish answers to questions about learning, such as: why? What for? How? Among others.

Regarding the first question AEBLI states that there are multiple purposes to learn autonomously. Learners may need autonomous learning to learn more, to see in advance what can be studied in a further course, to develop working skills, to face daily duties of life or just to take advantage of their free time.

On the second question stated above, the author thinks that enabling students to work in an autonomous way, it is necessary to help learners achieve five matters:

1. Keep in touch with ideas and things by themselves.
2. Show comprehension skills of facts and texts by themselves.
3. Plan actions and solve problems.
4. Exercise different activities and handle information mentally, and
5. Maintain constant motivation for learning.

About the same question he adds that there are also three basic components in autonomous learning. The first one deals with knowing the appropriate ways of learning, that is to say processes, strategies, mechanisms, or what meta-cognition entails itself. The second component has to do with decision-making on practical and procedural strategies to guarantee learning. And the last one refers to effective ways the students need to maintain their interest on their learning processes.

On the question about how to encourage autonomous learning, the author previously cited proposes a set of tips the students need to overcome difficulties in their processes.

1. The students must be aware about what an *effective performance* in their process means
2. Do it by themselves
3. Observe and evaluate their performance.
4. Formulate self-evaluation and self-monitoring procedures to control their learning

5. Use the previous self-regulation procedures, and
6. Judge the process and the outcomes

PRACTICAL ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT

Based on consulted literature, as well as on research experiences carried out by researchers in EFL learning settings, two teachers[2] of the group initially committed with the research have been implementing some methodological procedures to try to encourage the students' extra-class work in 1st, 2nd and 3rd of the credits system semesters of languages at Universidad de La Salle. Among those strategies are: diagnosis on EFL learning strategies, implementation of task-based work, co-evaluation and self-evaluation techniques as well as cooperative learning. These strategies are briefly described as follows:

RAISING THE STUDENTS' AWARENESS ABOUT LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES

As part of an initial diagnosis, the students of the courses cited above, solve a test on learning styles which helps the students recognize general strategies for learning, that is, an instrument, (Appendix 1). Through this instrument or one equivalent the students can recognize ways of their learning performance and in turn they can select effective strategies fitting their personalities, preferences and capabilities to study English. It doesn't mean that the students have to focus on only one type of learning – visual, auditory or kinesthetic- but to take as much advantage as they can of their own special strengths to continue growing integrally.

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2   The teachers Aurora Cardona and Emilena Hernandez who piloted the autonomous learning strategies(2005-II)

INVOLVING STUDENTS IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING

As part of the classroom work, a set of communicative tasks oriented to promote cooperative learning was proposed. These small projects have been developed at the end of some units, and they include integrative language skills, cooperative learning, extra-class work, consult, and the students' performance in meaningful activities.

Some of those tasks have been video recorded to gather information for further analysis on the process followed as well as on the results achieved. The procedure to carry out these tasks started with an agreement with the students on a practical work to use English into meaningful contexts. It followed some steps such as identification of topics and language to be practiced, contextualization of the communicative situations, rehearsal of communicative performance by the students in small groups and socialization of tasks with the whole class. (Appendix 2. A guide to develop a task)

KEEPING PORTFOLIOS AS RESOURCES TO GAIN AWARENESS ON EFL LEARNING

These written instruments were carried out by the students as tools to keep their own processes. They included reflections, written reports, analysis of literary texts, self-evaluation entries, stories, CD-ROM activities, among others.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN SELF-EVALUATION STRATEGIES

As stated by AEBLI (1998), another important strategy in autonomous learning processes has to do with the self-monitoring procedures in which evaluation, co evaluation and self-evaluation techniques play an important role. Thus, students

have been familiarized with evaluative checklists to revise not only the group work but also the individual one. (Appendix 3). On evaluation strategies for supervising the learning process, it would be suitable to revise OXFORD (1989) who proposes the following organizational and evaluating strategies: setting goals and objectives, seeking practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self-evaluation.

EXTRA-CLASS WORK INVOLVING USE OF LANGUAGES LABS

The students must be encouraged to use the laboratories not only during the sessions they have normally scheduled. So, teachers must give them lists of web pages and sites of free English courses on line so they can exercise their language skills on their own. However, it would be important to provide the students with a written source or guide to ensure an organized plan on what to do and how to do it.

APPRAISAL ON THE PARTIAL RESULTS

As stated at the very beginning of this paper, the current study is not a formal one, so, there have not been formal procedures to gather, systematize and analyze information. Therefore the results respond mainly to what the teachers involved in this project have reported orally and what it has seen through non structured classroom observation.

Conversely, what researchers and the other teachers directly involved in the project could see while piloting the strategies listed previously is that the implementation of these strategies is a starting point to involve students in more independent work whose effects are positive but not complete. Researchers think that it is necessary a harder work on the issues of met-cognition [meta conginiton?]

and motivation. The students need to know more about themselves, their strategies and learning styles to avoid getting unmotivated when tasks are difficult or challenging. As suggested by AEBLI (1998) motivation is a crucial element to maintain learning and it needs to be fostered both in teaching and learning processes.

Conclusions

After piloting the activities and tasks involving autonomous learning described above in order to enhance more independent learning behaviors in the students of English, it could be said that conducting autonomous learning in EFL classroom is a big endeavor, as this process demands time, planning, preparation, learners' negotiation and decision making as well as new roles for students and teachers. Consequently, the following are some tips grasped from the experiences that must be taken into account for further work:

♦ Autonomous learning has to do with independent attitudes, actions and views about learning and about life in general. It is deeply connected to ethical, social, mental and cultural values.

♦ As autonomous learning requires special attitudes, social values and aptitudes on the part of the learners, its development must be progressive, well planned and supported on a gradual and continuous work.

♦ Autonomous learning implies new roles for teachers and students, which simultaneously change the concepts of authority and power.

♦ Developing autonomous learning does not mean to give students lots of extra- work without any guidance

♦ Autonomous learning involved a work, which demands planning, constant evaluation and self-evaluation, dialogue, negotiation and decision making among the participants.

♦ Autonomous learning has to do with cognitive processes and in turn with the students' cognitive strategies useful to monitor, self-evaluate and make decisions on their own.

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APPENDIX 1

Learning Styles Self-assessment

Score each statement by giving yourself the appropriate score from 1 to 5, taking into account that 1 means you rarely do so and 5 that you do it most of the time.

Taken from **http://wwwstudygs.net/**

1. I feel the best way to remember something is to picture it in my head
2. I follow oral directions better than written ones
3. I often would rather listen to a lecture than read the material in a textbook
4. I am constantly fidgeting (e.g. tapping pen, playing with keys in my pocket)
5. I frequently require explanations of diagrams, graphs, or maps
6. I work skillfully with my hands to make or repair things
7. I often prefer to listen to the radio than read a newspaper
8. I typically prefer information to be presented visually, (e.g. flipcharts or chalkboard)
9. I usually prefer to stand while working
10. I typically follow written instructions better than oral ones
11. I am skillful at designing graphs, charts, and other visual displays
12. I generally talk at a fast pace and use my hands more than the average person to communicate what I want to say
13. I frequently sing, hum or whistle to myself
14. I am excellent at finding my way around even in unfamiliar surroundings
15. I am good at putting jigsaw puzzles together
16. I am always on the move
17. I excel at visual arts
18. I excel at sports
19. I'm an avid collector
20. I tend to take notes during verbal discussions/lectures to review later
21. I am verbally articulate and enjoy participating in discussions or classroom debates
22. I easily understand and follow directions on maps
23. I remember best by writing things down several times or drawing pictures and diagrams
24. I need to watch a speaker's facial expressions and body language to fully understand what they mean
25. I frequently use musical jingles to learn things
26. I often talk to myself when alone
27. I would rather listen to music than view a piece of art work
28. I need to actively participate in an activity to learn how to do it
29. I frequently tell jokes, stories and make verbal analogies to demonstrate a point
30. I frequently touch others as a show of friendship and camaraderie (e.g. hugging)

APPENDIX 2
«THE STREET MARKET»
2nd TASK GUIDE

WHAT?

To perform a role play where participants mechanize useful language required to buy and sell – selection of items; size, prices and materials comparison, use of polite expressions, questions, answers...-

WHAT FOR?

♦ To reinforce and mechanize language, vocabulary and grammar patterns studied in units 3 and 8

♦ To integrate language skills practice

♦ To encourage the students to interact in authentic and meaningful situations.

♦ To encourage cooperative work and autonomous learning among the students.

HOW?

(In groups of 2 or 3 students)

1. Prepare a script of the situation establishing the role and oral interactions of each member of the group. (Look for support in the course materials and classroom partners)

2. Rehearse the communicative situation as many times as required.

3. Prepare visual aids and realia in order to create a real atmosphere for the role play. «A Street Market»

4. Share the work to the classroom partners.

WHEN?

Written paper and Oral dissertation: 3rd week of March

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The project will be graded taking into account: written script and oral presentation. The written report must show organization, coherence and a complete script. For the oral presentation, the students must prepare their interventions properly taking into account: pronunciation, intonation patterns, fluency, and accuracy and appropriate management of questions and answers.

APPENDIX 3
«SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST»
ON EXTRA CLASS WORK

Objective

Dear student, by mean of this instrument you will recognize your own strengths and weaknesses in extra class work assigned in order to improve your English learning process.

Instruction

Circle the number that best evaluates your performance in each one of the following items, taking into account that 1 means you rarely do so and 5 that you do it most of the time.

1)	I usually look for opportunities to exercise my language skills outside the classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
2)	I try to use the new vocabulary that I learn in each class by putting it in new contexts	1 2 3 4 5
3)	I usually interact in English with my classroom partners	1 2 3 4 5
4)	I check the lesson components in the course materials before studying them in the class.	1 2 3 4 5
5)	I am aware about the best ways to learn reading and I try them on my own	1 2 3 4 5
6)	I am aware about the best ways to learn listening and I try them on my own	1 2 3 4 5
7)	I am aware about the best ways to learn writing and I try them on my own	1 2 3 4 5
8)	I am aware about the best ways to learn speaking and I try them on my own	1 2 3 4 5
9)	I am always motivated to learn new things	1 2 3 4 5
10)	I explain the meaning of words by means of definitions	1 2 3 4 5
11)	I take advantage of the multimedia resources to improve my English	1 2 3 4 5
12)	I make notes about new things the teacher explains to the class	1 2 3 4 5
13)	I refine my pronunciation by listening as many times as I need the listening exercises	1 2 3 4 5
14)	I write e-mails to my partners and friends using English	1 2 3 4 5
15)	I read on my own literary texts, stories and poems	1 2 3 4 5
16)	I allocate at least two hours to practice what is studied in the class every day	1 2 3 4 5
17)	I incorporate the feedback provided by the teacher in writing exercises.	1 2 3 4 5

What other activities do I develop outside the classroom to improve my English?

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