INTRODUCTION

The current changes in secondary and higher education in Colombia, such as the demand of quality standards, accountability of programs, use of standardized tests for teachers and learners, use of a credit system, among others, demand institutions to conduct research, which may transform the curricula and the administration of programs.

This paper reports preliminary results of the research project: “Autonomous learning and proficiency in a teacher education program”, being carried out at a private university in Bogotá. The main objective is to inquire about the incidence of autonomous learning strategies on EFL proficiency in a group of student-teachers.

The paper reviews the literature and takes into account the pedagogical experiences of the teacher-researchers. Action research was used following three stages: observation, action and reflection. The study expects to contribute to the transformation of the pedagogical processes from dependence to independence to autonomy at the department.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To inquire about the incidence of autonomous learning strategies on the proficiency of student teachers.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- To learn about the student-teachers’ English proficiency
- To inquire about the learners’ level of autonomy in their English learning process.
- To lead students from dependence to independence in learning a language using autonomous learning strategies.
- To propose pedagogical actions that encourage independent learning.

SETTING AND POPULATION

The population belongs to the undergraduate English Program at a private Colombian University. Two
groups were considered for the study: one of 30 learners registered in the course English Intermediate II (5th course) and another of 27, taking English Advanced II (8th course). Their ages range between 17 and 30.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review covers the following areas: definitions of autonomy and levels of control; approaches to fostering autonomy, measures of proficiency used in the study, a model of implementation of autonomy in a language program for learner training (Nunan, 1997: 195 and MacLagan’s, 1992: 77-84) proposal for autonomy in a language department. For proficiency, the model proposed by the Council of Europe Framework for Foreign Languages (2001) was also considered.

**Definitions**

The concept of autonomy has become part of the mainstream of research and practice within the field of Language Education. Holec (1981) and Little (1990) argue that autonomy is not a single, easily describable behaviour. For them “autonomy is defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning”. On the other hand, Benson (2001) states that “autonomy is the natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning.”

Holec and Little’s definitions cover two aspects of the nature of autonomy as an individual capacity, but both tend to underplay a third vital element in autonomous learning: that the content of learning should be freely determined by the learners; while for Benson (1996) “control over learning necessarily involves actions that have social consequences”. The authors of this paper adhere to Benson’s proposal which considers the capacity to take control of one’s learning. He argues that a description of autonomy should at least recognise the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: control over learning management; control over cognitive processes and control over learning content. These terms will be explained below.

Control over learning management can be described in terms of behaviours that learners employ in order to manage the planning, organisation and evaluation of their learning. In the context of language learning, Breen and Mann (1997:134-6) suggest that autonomous learners:

- see their relationship to what is to be learned, to how they will learn and to the resources available in which they are in charge or in control;
- are in an authentic relationship to the language they are learning and have a genuine desire to learn that particular language;
- have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or assumed negative assessments of themselves or their work;
- are able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what they next need to do and experience;
- are alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful and opportunistic way;
- have a capacity to learn that is independent of the educational processes in which they are engaged;
- are able to make use of the environment they find themselves in strategically,
- are able to negotiate between the strategic meeting of their own needs and responding to the needs and desires of other group members.
Control over cognitive process is understood as a matter of the psychology of learning rather than as directly observable learning behaviours, although it will generally be inferred from the observation of these behaviours. This type of control is also concerned with general attitudes towards learning more than with particular mental processes. Benson (2001) argues that “it may be possible to describe control over the cognitive processes involved in language learning in terms of three areas of research that currently hold most promises in this regard: attention, reflection and metacognitive knowledge”.

Control over learning content is an aspect of self-management, which like other aspects of learning has its basis on the control over cognitive processes. There is a good reason to believe that control over content is fundamental to autonomy. If learners are self managing methodological aspects of the learning process, their learning may not be authentically self-directed if they are not learning what they want to learn. Also in institutional contexts, learner control of content has social and political dimensions. In short, the learners may learn how to exercise control over the collective situation of their learning, using capacities for social interaction that are distinct from those required in the management of individual learning.

Fostering Autonomy

Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it, given appropriate conditions and preparation. The conditions for the development of autonomy include the opportunity to exercise control over learning. The ways in which we organize the practice of teaching and learning therefore, have an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners. Castillo (2004) discusses the teacher’s role in promoting those modes. On the other hand, Benson (2001) argues that “teachers and educational institutions should attempt to foster autonomy through practices that allow learners to engage in modes of learning in which this capacity can be developed. Because the capacity for control over learning has various aspects, autonomy may take various forms”.

Fostering autonomy does not therefore imply any particular approach to practice. In principle any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered as a means of promoting autonomy. In the field of foreign language education, however, autonomy has come to be closely identified with practices that foster autonomy and that can be grouped in six broad headings (Benson 2001:109): Resource-based approaches, Technology-based approaches, Learner-based approaches, Classroom-based approaches, Curriculum-based approaches, and Teacher-based approaches. The distinctions are largely a matter of focus. In practice, approaches are often combined, sometimes eclectically. Although claims are often made for the particular effectiveness of one approach over others, most researchers and practitioners would accept that they are interdependent.

English Language Proficiency

The research group considered that the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), Council of Europe (2001) help understand the construct of proficiency. Accordingly, the Quick Placement Test (2004) was used for measuring the English language proficiency of the learners in this study. The bands are presented below:

The scale and detailed descriptors can be consulted in Council of Europe (2001)
A model of implementation of autonomy

From their experience at the university the research group considered Nunan’s Model (1997) useful. Below are presented the five levels of implementation. Columns 1, 2, 3 and 4 correspond to the model. The authors expanded the model by including column 5 for strategies and resources (Gardner and Miller 1996) and column 6 for the focus on control in order to account for the action plan being carried out in the study.

**TABLE 1. AUTONOMY: LEVELS OF IMPLEMENTATION IN THE STUDY LEVEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Focus on Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using</td>
<td>Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies</td>
<td>Identifying students awareness “Becoming an autonomous learner” Worksheet (1st) Identifying students learning styles “Multiple Intelligences, what’s my style” worksheet (2nd &amp; 3rd) Planning student’s learning process Worksheet (4th) Making the most of your language learning. Worksheet (5th)</td>
<td>control over cognitive processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer</td>
<td>Learners make choices among a range of options</td>
<td>Learning about self-assessment of continuing language development. Worksheet (6th) Finding Self-access activities worksheet(7th) Prioritizing language needs. Worksheet (8th)</td>
<td>control over learning management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program</td>
<td>Learners modify / adapt tasks</td>
<td>Planning a learner contract. Worksheet (9th) Showing evidence of autonomous learning tasks. Collection of tasks by means of a portfolio. Worksheet (10th)</td>
<td>control over learning management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creation</td>
<td>Learners create their own goals and objectives</td>
<td>Learner s create their own tasks</td>
<td>Application of reading strategies. Newspapers Novels, articles, stories, Magazine; Authentic material.</td>
<td>control over learning content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reviewing these issues, the study aims at contributing to expand knowledge on autonomy and to explore the relationship between autonomous learning and English language proficiency. It is expected that data reveal that learners may move from dependence to independence and that the model facilitated change.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The teacher-researchers observed difficulties in the learning process. Surveys indicated poor attitude, not much learning management, motivation or awareness. The Quick Placement Test corroborated that the learners' English language proficiency was well below the expected standard that would correspond to the number of contact hours these learners have had.

**MAIN QUESTION**

To what extent does the implementation of autonomous language learning strategies influence the level of English proficiency in a group of student-teachers?
SUB QUESTIONS

• How do autonomous learning strategies influence the control over learning management?
• How do autonomous learning strategies influence the control over cognitive processes
• How do autonomous learning strategies influence the control over content?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This project used action research, which according to Wallace (1998) is the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some area of professional practice. It is often considered as the most accessible form of research for teachers, because its goal is the solution of problems encountered in every day practice.

PROCEDURES

- Preliminary data on language proficiency was collected with the Quick Placement Test.

- A preliminary survey was applied for teachers and students from the 5th and the 8th English course to determine the problem.

- Identification of the steps followed by the learners’ actions in the “awareness” and “involvement” levels of the model. Worksheets were used to that end.

- Identification of the steps followed by the learners’ actions in the “intervention” “creation” and “transcendence” levels of the model.

- Data gathering and analysis procedures. This stage is underway.

- Statement of the pedagogical implications

PRELIMINARY DATA ANALYSIS

The QPT results indicate that: most of the 8th course learners have not achieved up to expected standards, and that at least 5 learners of the 5th course fall behind the standard.

TABLE 2. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level in QPT</th>
<th>5th Course</th>
<th>8th course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of learners</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the other hand, surveys were applied to teachers and students. Data include the experiences, attitudes and expectations that learners and teachers have regarding autonomy. The surveys results also suggest learners’ dependence; there is not much dialogue between teachers and learners regarding learning and assessment; there is no syllabus negotiation; both, teachers and learners are interested in increasing the English proficiency level of the program; and that there is little use of L2 out of the classroom although students report that they work on their own.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Some actions were carried out from the very beginning of the course taking into consideration the five learner’s actions in a model of autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. The worksheets proposed by Gardner and Miller (1996) were adapted.

AWARENESS: The four autonomous learning strategies: Identifying students awareness, Identifying students learning styles, Planning student’s learning process and Making the most of language learning, were taken as the basic structure for a series of lessons to follow in the first level.

The first strategy was to identify students’ awareness of the importance of self-assessing linguistic and attitudinal aspects in the learning process. This was done through a discussion that was guided by a worksheet containing some questions, such as: Think about the last time you learnt to do something by yourself. What was it? Now think about how you worked, why did you approach it that way? Students said that this strategy helped them reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, but that this required responsibility, preparation and honesty from the part of students. The second and third strategies were to identify students’ learning styles and strategies. The results suggest that learners do not like to show their feelings and do not seem to be reflective, and it can be safely argued that learners can work by themselves on different tasks without much difficulty.

The fourth strategy was to plan students’ learning. To further develop the idea of students planning their own learning, they answered twelve questions. Their responses indicate that many self-access learners encounter problems because they fail to realize the limitations of managing time. Although for them it is difficult to set goals they take into account different resources such as the Internet to learn outside class.

The fifth strategy was to organize learning to achieve realistic goals. It led students to a reflection on how they develop important characteristics to be autonomous such as: faith, motivation, awareness, time management, setting goals, determination, support, and enjoyment. Responses show that most of the students are good at reading in English but they feel they have to work on their listening skills. When asking about setting realistic goals, students answered they would like to develop communicative strategies, they would like to have easy access to the Internet, and they would like to be able to have the support of classmates or friends.

IN VolVEMENT: After consolidating the strategy training in the first level, teacher-researchers ensured that students were aware of the strategies available to them and the situations in which they could be used. Three more worksheets were applied in the second
level. They were focused on these strategies: Learning about self-assessment of continuing language development, Finding Self-access activities, and Prioritizing language needs.

The objective of the sixth strategy was to help students identify their mistakes and to look for strategies to overcome them. Students think their most common mistakes are in pronunciation and speaking.

The seventh strategy applied was to find the activities the students are able to do to improve their English without a teacher and also to identify the things they want to do but are not able to do by themselves. They were given a list of twelve items that helped learners to keep a record of their autonomous learning. It can be concluded through the analysis of students' answers that they are able to work by their own on reviewing work done in class, borrowing English materials, watching films with subtitles in Spanish, listening to music, reading books. There are some activities they want to do but are not still able to without the teacher's guidance such as: watching films with subtitles in English, reading books in the original version, reading newspapers or magazines in English, talking to native speakers, doing exercises and activities with an answer key, going to a bookshop to look for books in English and finding friends who want to do the previous activities with them.

The eighth strategy was to prioritize language needs. For doing this, students were given a list of language skills in order to tick the ones they need most at present or they will need in the future, giving the proficiency for the ticked items. Some learners were not able to find skills they actually needed and found consultants' advice useful.

The strategies applied until this part of the project present ways and techniques to help students become autonomous and independent learners of English, able to apply all their skills in everyday situations. In order to achieve this goal it is vital to focus on what learners are expected to do with the language once they have achieved a certain level of competence and guide them into being able to apply what they have learned in situations which are encountered outside the classrooms.

The collection of portfolios as well as the strategies applied by means of the worksheets will lead the researchers to analyse data by compiling learners difficulties, commitments and actions plans. We will be looking for evidence on the effect of the innovation on proficiency when learners take the quick placement test.

As a corollary, it can be said that doing action research has been a very enriching process. It has been noticed that it is an essential tool to help students reflect upon their linguistic performance and to encourage them to take charge of it. As teacher-researchers we have to understand that it is not enough to encourage students to become autonomous, but that it is necessary to take specific steps to help them.

References


Colombia. 32-36.


Para hacer referencia a este texto.
