

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN A VIRTUAL EFL COURSE

A Thesis Presented by

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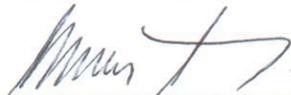
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ABSTRACT

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Reading Comprehension, student-centered instruction.

Learner autonomy has gained much attention as a quality that facilitates learning in virtual environments. This case study explores how a group of graduate students manifest autonomy in a virtual reading comprehension course. Analysis of forums, questionnaires and interviews provided with insights to conclude that these students show both attitudes related to autonomy and the lack of it. In other words, it was seen that the students manifested not only some behaviors associated to autonomy but also some others associated to the lack of this quality through the development of the course. For example, most of them showed attitudes that lead to autonomy such as motivation and commitment at the beginning, but they also manifested high levels of dependence and lack of self-confidence. Later, they became more confident and performed more independently, two attitudes close to autonomy. On the other hand, some students maintained their preference of learning English in face to face instruction, because they considered it more efficient due to the teacher's physical support. Results showed a need for designing virtual EFL courses that promote the development of autonomy. This study concludes by suggesting the enhancement of a student-centered instruction with the help of ICT.

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Introduction

Autonomy has been an important topic of discussion in education and language learning (Little, 2007; Benson, 2001). It is assumed that an autonomous student learns a language faster as compared with a student who highly depends on the teacher's instruction (Little, 2007). According to the experts, autonomy is a broad quality that enables students to learn meaningfully, make decisions and regulate their learning. Autonomy, from this perspective, becomes critical in helping students to learn easily and in a more independent way. Besides, an autonomous student has the capacity to control, reflect and take advantage of learning to improve at a personal and social level (Benson, 2001). Researchers in the field agree on stating that autonomy is both a purpose and an important trait to develop in education (Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 2007; Pennycook, 1997). As Benson (1997) states: "Greater autonomy is a legitimate goal of language education and autonomous learning is equivalent to effective learning" (p.18).

In the field of virtual education, the concept of autonomy has also gained a very important place. Motteram (1997, p.17) claims that there has always been a recognized connection between educational technology and learner autonomy. Therefore, autonomy is seen as an essential quality for facilitating learning in both traditional and virtual education. The importance of autonomy in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is reported on Benson (2001) who states that learners need a certain development of autonomy to use new technologies adequately (p.140).

In the last two decades, a number of technology-based projects have reported on the connection between CALL and autonomy. Figura and Jarvis (2007) examined the types of strategies students use and the extent to which learner autonomy is fostered when working

with Computer-Based Materials (CBMs). They evidenced a good use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies among the participants. However, social strategies which involve interaction need to be fostered when teaching with CBMs. Ruiz (2005) reported on the design of a pilot application based upon Technology Applied to the Development of Learner Autonomy (TADLA), which promotes the development of attitudes associated to learner autonomy. Kurtis (2008) carried out a study with immigrants who learned academic writing in Greek using Moodle. He showed how both guided and free writing activities of literary texts encourage students to express themselves, developing a voice in what they write, an ability highly related to autonomy (Pennycook, 1997). Fanany (2005) shared the experiences of an Indonesian program at Deakin University in converting four years of conventional tertiary Indonesian language material for online presentation. She found that online environments can maximize learning opportunities. Besides, that autonomy is promoted through the methodology of nonlinear presentations where students can make decisions concerning what they want to learn by choosing tasks from a range of materials. Gonzalez and St. Louis (2008) illustrated how the integration of Web 2.0 tools in their classes increases learners' willingness to participate actively in their own learning process by making them aware of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This study confirmed that the use of technological tools can foster learner autonomy. Other studies (Sotillo, 2002; Healey, 2002; Bordonaro, 2003; Blin, 2005) also reported on the connection between autonomy and CALL at the international level. All of them emphasize on the importance of autonomy in language learning in virtual environments.

The development of autonomy is also recognized and promoted as one of the main goals for education in Colombia. The Ministry of Education in its law 30 (1992) established the promotion of reflexive thinking, diversity of ideologies and personal autonomy. The

law 115 (Ministerio de Educacion, 1994) instituted the development of democracy, autonomy and responsibility in schools. On the other hand, El Plan Decenal de Educación 2006-2016 (Ministerio de Educacion, 2006) sees autonomy as an end and challenge for education in the XXI Century. Therefore, as it is seen in all these educational laws, the national government has included autonomy as an important aim in the educational field for the coming decades.

Aligned with this national interest, the creation of the COFE project (Colombian Framework for English) in 1991 also emphasized on the promotion of autonomy in language learning. The project suggested that educational institutions worked to create an environment where students can manifest and foster autonomy (Cárdenas, 2009). After this governmental proposal, a number of EFL researchers have contributed to the construction of local knowledge about autonomy. Usma and Orrego (2009) have reported on several studies carried out by local researchers on learner and teacher autonomy. Usma (2007) reviews conceptual and empirical studies in the country to show that teacher autonomy is a necessary condition for the development of learner autonomy. These scholars emphasize on the need of continuing studying the concept of autonomy from both theory and practice in the national context.

Other researchers have also contributed to the field of autonomy doing research in practice. Frodden and Correa (2000) explored the extent to what students in an EFL undergraduate program develop autonomy. Sierra and Frodden (2003) shared an experience where self-assessment and learning strategies can help students to become more autonomous. Mesa and Frodden (2004) explained how project work can become an appropriate strategy to develop learner autonomy.

In the same line of thought, Fandiño (2009) carried out an action research study about the promotion of teacher and learner autonomy focusing on teaching socio-affective language learning strategies. Lagos and Ruiz (2009) reported on a study about students, teachers and administrators' subjective experiences about autonomy in learning and teaching processes at the university. Luna and Sanchez (2005) described the autonomous learning characteristics of learners in a group of students trained to be teachers. In this empirical study, the authors found that the discovery of students' needs and their individual learning style can be used to promote autonomy. Ariza (2008) conducted a study on students' understandings of autonomy evidenced in their learning experiences in a public university. The study reported that students perceived autonomy as an opportunity to learn beyond the classroom. They were engaged in decision making and reflection by carrying out learning self-evaluation processes and construction of knowledge through experience. Ariza and Viáfara (2009) examined the professional preparation and autonomous practices of tutees in an EFL undergraduate program. They found that students' personality highly influences on their learning process. Besides, the promotion of academic values such as commitment and enthusiasm improved their language skills.

Concerning the study of autonomy in CALL in Colombia there has been an increasing interest in this connection. Ardila and Bedoya (2006) reported on the inclusion of new information and communication technology (ICT) in a contrastive grammar course at the undergraduate level. They found that the promotion of autonomous learning through the implementation of Moodle platform in the course improved teachers' practices and facilitated students' learning process. Gomez and Pineda (2009) carry out an exploratory study to identify how university students use technology to learn English and the extent which teachers use it to enhance learner autonomy. Muñoz and González (2010) explored

the roles of a teacher in a virtual reading comprehension course. In this case study they found that teachers need more training to teach Web-based courses and that virtual environments require being in permanent revision to enhance students' learning and autonomy. Vargas, Cabrales and Marrugo (2010) analyzed the influence of learning practices and independent assignments on the development of learner autonomy of an undergraduate program. They found that students' interest in both the program and the ICT is a factor that helps in the development of autonomy. Cuasialpud (2010) reported on an exploratory study on the experience of two indigenous students in a virtual EFL course. They found that feelings of frustration and lack of both motivation and autonomy affect learning. Finally, an empirical research conducted by Cuesta (2009) discussed the design and implementation of online materials and emphasized on the importance of their permanent assessment to be aligned to the instruction, students' motivation and performance. This last study advocates in favor of the promotion of autonomy as one of the relevant features of online course materials.

The studies of autonomy in CALL carried out in Colombia remark on the importance of learner autonomy for students to succeed in language learning when studying in a virtual environment. Virtual courses seem to increase in number as an option to learn a foreign language and strategies to promote autonomy through CBMs for learning appear to be a goal in virtual education. Some of the studies reported here evidence that students seem highly motivated when learning languages with computers. However, it is also found that students need more support to manage and take control over their learning in virtual environments. Therefore, it is necessary to continue examining students' levels of autonomy when studying in online environments to reflect on how teachers and administrators can improve these courses in order to promote autonomy in language

learning. To sum up, the need to promote autonomy in virtual learning is paramount in our local context, because such a quality could facilitate and allow students to manage their learning process more independently.

This study intends to contribute to the field of autonomy in virtual education by analyzing not only students' manifestations of autonomy in a virtual reading comprehension course, but also the factors that affect students to manifest it. The research question under investigation in this study reads as follows: How do students manifest autonomy in a virtual EFL reading comprehension course and what factors are associated with these manifestations? The theoretical framework of this case study reviews the technical, political and psychological notion of autonomy proposed by Benson (1997) and the principles of connectivism which promote learning mediated by technology. Adopting the constructivist perspective, I identify behaviors and attitudes related to autonomy that involve the concept of control over the learning process (Benson, 2010). Since autonomy is partially showed by the participants, I study what personal and external factors affected them to manifest autonomy. The results of this study indicate that students manifested attitudes and behaviors associated with both autonomy and lack of it. Moreover, external factors such as the course design the platform and the teacher's role influenced on students' autonomy.

There are several studies in the national context that have explored how ICT have favored the development of learner autonomy, (Ardila & Bedoya, 2006; Gomez & Pineda, 2009; Cuesta, 2010). However, this case study particularly shows how some features of the course such as the platform, the design and the role of the teacher affected the students either in a positive or negative way to manifest autonomy. Exploring these students' behaviors from the beginning until the end of the course gives an account of a learning

process that has not been reported as a study in the field of learner autonomy so far. In the following section, I present the theoretical framework as the base of this case study.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical support of this study is based on the three notions of autonomy presented by Benson (1997): The technical, the political and the psychological. The second part of this chapter presents the principles of connectivism, a theory born from constructivism which promotes both learning by the use of technology and the development of cognitive skills that lead to autonomy.

Notions of Autonomy

One of the most significant contributions for the study of learner autonomy in language learning is provided by Benson (1997). He suggests that making connections between principles of knowledge, approaches to learning and accounts of autonomy, the development of learner autonomy in language learning can be clearly understood. From this angle, autonomy can be conceptualized from three versions: The technical, political and psychological (Benson, 1997, p.18).

From a technical perspective, autonomy is conceived from positivism and aims to provide students with the abilities they require to lead their own learning beyond teacher's instruction (Benson, 1997, p.23). Students construct strategies and develop cognitive skills to learn by themselves. This version of autonomy shows learning as a technical activity where students aim to achieve their learning objectives by developing specific learning skills that imply cognition such as repetition, memorization and guessing meaning from context.

A political version of autonomy is also proposed by Benson (1997). Different from Positivism and Constructivism, this political concept comes from Critical theory. Benson (1997) points out that “critical theory encourages version of learner autonomy that are more social and political in character. Autonomy grows as learners become more critically aware of the social context of their learning” (p.24). Opposite to the view of autonomy as an individual notion, the political perspective includes the social, cultural and political factors associated with language teaching and learning. Pennycook (1997) names it as “pedagogy of cultural alternatives” (p.47) and asserts that language learning should be linked to the context where it is used. From this perspective, autonomy is the voice that the individual develops to understand and explain the world conditioned by the culture and the society. Pennycook (1997) also maintains that autonomy is “The struggle to become the author of one’s own world, to be able to create one’s own meanings, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of everyday life” (p.39). On the other hand, Kumaravadivelu (2003) names this version of autonomy as “liberatory” (p.141) which empowers people to strengthen their potential overcoming sociopolitical obstacles. Hence, according to these scholars, students manifest autonomy from a political perspective when they think critically, propose and create solutions in favor of improving things. Concerning learning, they are able to question what they are learning, how language is taught and how useful it becomes for their life and context.

From the psychological perspective, the learner has the opportunity to choose what and how s/he wants to learn (Benson, 2001, p.24). Further, he claims that constructivism sustains versions of autonomy based on individual decisions concerning what and how to learn (Ibid). From this perspective, autonomy is seen as a natural potential of the individual (Candy, 1989, p.101) and this potential is associated with the concept of self-direction

which is defined as the learner's general capacity to lead learning efficiently. However, the concept of autonomy goes beyond than the concept of self-direction. Autonomy is related to singular, personal and principled qualities connected with this capacity (Benson, 2001, p.34). This version of autonomy focuses on the learner's behavior, attitudes and personality, as Little argues: "Autonomy is a capacity, for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (1991, p.4).

A significant amount of scholars defend the psychological version of autonomy. Schwienhorst (2008, p.14) claims that Multi-user domain object-oriented (MOO) environments provide the conditions to develop learner autonomy; this type of CALL offers the opportunity to foster experimentation, reflection and interaction which are key elements for autonomous learning. Little (2007, p.19) agrees with the constructivist perspective of autonomy and states that it provides learners with plenty of discourse initiatives that conventional pedagogies do not offer. Initiatives such as asking exploratory questions, making suggestions, challenging others' statements, and evaluating learning plans, tasks and outcomes become important from this analytical angle. Deci (1996) claims that "we are autonomous when we are fully willing to do what we are doing and we embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment" (p.2). According to these constructivist authors, autonomy is implied in the learner's attitudes and behaviors. All these studies show how autonomy is highly related to the confidence of the individual, self-government and promotion of qualities in language learners (Benson, 1997, p.29).

Measuring how autonomous a learner could be results to be a challenging task. Autonomy is not a quality students have or do not, as Nunan (1997) discusses "autonomy is not an 'all-or-nothing concept' but a matter of degree" (p.92). Perhaps the clearer way to see how a student manifests autonomy is through certain visible behaviors associated with

the broader construct of autonomy. Therefore, measuring autonomy tends to be irregular or variable. Benson (2010, p.79) finds the notion of control valuable because it resembles to be reflected in some perceptible behaviors that are connected to the tenet of learner autonomy. Autonomous learning implies, by definition, that the student is in control of the learning process to some degree. According to Benson (2010, p.82), it is through the idea of control, therefore, that researchers are apparently most able to assert the integrity of autonomy as a usable construct within language education research.

Rivers (2001) also agrees on the concept of control to identify how learner autonomy is manifested:

Evidence of control in three areas: (1) self-assessment of conflicts between learner and teacher styles, learning style conflicts within the groups, and the students' own learning styles and strategy preferences; (2) learner autonomy in the form of demands for the modification of aspects of the courses, including methodology, teacher feedback, classroom environment, sequencing and activities; and (3) self-directed language learning behaviors, including prioritizing classroom and homework assignments, selection of tasks and inclusion of an independent study day in the programme (Rivers, 2001, p.286).

Additionally, Rivers (2001) as cited in Benson (2010, p.90) goes on to say that the precise use of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies could demonstrate control over the language learning process and the learning environment, being those the attributes of self-directed learning, which, at the same time, could be one of the ways in which autonomous learning can be manifested. On the other hand, Lai (2001) defines control as "the learner's ability to self-monitor and self-evaluate his learning tasks and/or learning strategies employed for each learning activity" (p.35). O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.137) define metacognitive strategies as those which help learners think about their learning process, plan their learning, monitor the learning task, and evaluate how well they have learnt. Wenden (1999, p.436) defines metacognitive strategies as general skills through

which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning. Cognitive strategies defined by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) cover “interaction with the materials to be learned, manipulating the material mentally or physically, or applying a specific technique to a learning task” (p. 138). Social strategies involve interacting with other people to assist learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), and affective strategies involve regulating emotions and lowering anxieties (Oxford, 1990, p.21). To sum up, the idea of control over learning explained through the use of metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective strategies is associated to autonomy because the use of such strategies are a way in how autonomy can be evidenced. Besides, reflection, critical thinking, independent action, commitment, interest, motivation, among other qualities are other ways to reflect autonomy. In conclusion, autonomy is seen in multiple ways through the manifestation of behaviors and attitudes.

The purpose of this case study is to identify the students' manifestation of autonomy in a virtual environment and what factors are associated with these attitudes and behaviors. The psychological notion of autonomy was adopted here to analyze how these students manifest such a quality from the constructivist perspective. On the other hand, a theory born from the constructivism is presented here as part of the theoretical framework of this research. Connectivism promotes learning through the use of technology and the development of abilities that lead to the development of autonomy.

Connectivism for the promotion of autonomy

Connectivism integrates principles of constructivism and the theory of chaos to describe learning in the digital era (Siemens, 2006, 34). From this perspective, reality is in

permanent change, so knowledge and learning are continually transforming. These principles offer a whole new perspectives for language teaching and learning in virtual environments, as they are highly connected to student-centered and context-based approach. Students are positioned as creators and transformers of knowledge, while learning is facilitated by technology (Ibid.31). From this approach, students count on a learning environment where autonomy is fostered while they develop emergent learning (Ibid, 34). This involves high levels of cognition, reflection and promotes innovation, capacities that are linked to the notion of autonomy described above.

When virtual courses adopt Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, interactive virtual platforms and social networks, they enhance collaboration, interactivity and user-generated content, qualities that connectivism puts down roots (Pegrum, 2009, p. 120). Therefore, it is important that language virtual courses reflect on connectivist theory to design and develop teaching programs based on “communicative networking, community building and identity negotiation” (Ibid, 33), processes that favor learner autonomy and consequently emergence learning.

Web 2.0 tools also embrace a social orientation. Students learn when they interact, make connections, create and share their understandings in networks. In order to provide students with such as conditions for learning in virtual environments, Pegrum (2009, p.34) suggests that teachers must be prepared to face computing and gain pedagogical backgrounds for e-learning and technological tools. Thus, they will be able to provide students with a virtual environment where they can explore, make connections, communicate and create.

A virtual language course designed under the principles of connectivism provide students with tasks that make them reflect, express their point of view, make decisions,

learn collaboratively, propose new alternatives to solve problems, and innovate using the language, manifestations associated with student autonomy. To sum up, the qualities students develop for learning in connection with connectivism are similar to those associated with autonomy and constructivism. This study makes the connection among these concepts within the context of a virtual reading comprehension course at a public university. In the following chapter the setting where this research was carried out is presented.

Setting

This study took place in a virtual reading comprehension course for graduate students from different programs at a public university in Colombia. Many graduate students take this course because they need to be certified as competent in reading comprehension as a requirement to pursue their studies. Besides, they decide to take the virtual course because they are usually busy and cannot attend in-person classes.

This virtual reading comprehension course is developed in 120 hours. It is not part of the curriculum, but students have to take a reading test or do the course to continue in the graduate program. During the course, students are assigned some tasks per week and have to send them to the tutor following instructions and deadlines through a virtual platform called Moodle. The course was designed to teach reading comprehension from a structural view of language focusing on syntactic and semantics. Most of the activities include completing charts with the information of a text, identifying word categories, guessing the meaning of words using their morphology and inferring meaning from pictures or titles. Students also participate in forums; take a test at the end of each week and do the evaluation of the course. The purpose of the course is to provide graduate students with reading skills that allow them to interpret general and specialized texts.

Virtual reading comprehension courses in this program usually serve between thirty and thirty five students. Most of the students who take the course work full time and have other subjects to study. Some groups are formed by people from all over the country and others from the same city where the university is located. If it is the case, they usually receive some orientation about the use of the platform in a face to face session before starting the course. Most of them do not have the basic computer skills at that point.

These virtual courses were created by the university to offer students another opportunity to meet the prerequisite of the graduate programs. Many of the students who take this course have already failed the proficiency online or traditional test once or several times before, so, after this failure, they decide to take the virtual course as a second option to certify their reading competence. In the following section, I describe the data collection and analysis in this research.

Method

To carry out this research, I used the case study approach. Creswell (2007) recommends this qualitative approach “to examine a case bounded in time and place, and look for contextual material time, from multiple sources of information to provide an in-depth picture of the case” (p.96). Case study was the appropriate method to answer the research question, because a particular group was studied for three months, they all studied a specialization in law, one of the most common graduate programs that demand the reading comprehension course. Besides, this particular group was a representative sample of the typical graduate students’ profile. To conduct this research, I asked for the required permission and informed all the participants about the purpose. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and analysis of forums.

Data Collection

In order to answer the research question, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and student forum in the platform. The way these techniques were employed in the study is presented in this section.

Questionnaires.

I administered a questionnaire to the whole group. I posted this instrument in Moodle. Seventeen out of thirty six students, that is 50 percent of the class, answered and sent the questionnaire back through the platform. In this questionnaire, I attempted to have a description of students’ performance in the course and identify manifestations of autonomy

such as behaviors and qualities associated to this concept (Benson, 1997, p.34). Insights from the questionnaire indicated the frequency of some practices connected to autonomy; for instance, how often students self-assess and reflect on their learning and how often they socialize with others (see Appendix 2).

Student forums.

I collected students' written texts such as their comments and questions concerning the course through the forums on the platform. The purpose of this procedure was to identify students' behaviors linked to autonomy. I did a detailed search of attitudes reflected in their discourse which were related to autonomy. For example, I identified how they experienced the learning process during the course. Besides, how they dealt with the technical problems and assignments.

Individual interviews.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven students. They were chosen as a representative sample of the group. Some got the highest or the lowest scores, while one quit the course after the first weeks and two were average students. Before the interview, participants signed a consent form where they manifested their agreement to participate. I explained the purpose of the study and clarified that their participation was voluntary. The interview was conducted in Spanish and audio recorded. The purpose of this data collection source was to be informed about students' behaviors and attitudes linked to autonomy while they were involved in the virtual course. Besides, I looked for their opinions about

the course and possible personal and external factors that may influence student autonomy, including factors such as studying for a requirement, students' lifestyle, and the platform.

In the interest of generating maximally useful data, I also conducted an individual interview with the teacher of the course who had taught in the program for one year and a half. The purpose of this interview was to understand how the teacher defines her students in terms of autonomy, and from her perspective, how students manifested it. This interview was also conducted in Spanish and audio recorded.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data using content analysis which is a research technique for making valid inferences from texts (Krippendorff, 2004). As a technique, content analysis provides current insights and expands the researcher's understandings of particular phenomena (p.18). In this process, I recognized themes, coded and found connections. I highlighted passages related to some possible manifestations of autonomy through the development of the course. Besides, other themes emerged from data concerning some factors that could affect learner autonomy. I coded these themes and synthesized information. Finally, some categories resulted from making connections among data.

In order to make this study trustworthy, I followed Krefting (1991, p. 214) proposal which consists in integrating mechanisms that ensure credibility, confirmability and dependability to the study. Toma (2006, p.406) names these characteristics as trustworthiness categories or alternative approaches to enhance the rigor of qualitative research. In order to establish credibility, I triangulated data sources: I used different data sources and obtained data from different participants. To enhance confirmability, I

discussed the data collection and analysis procedures with my advisor. He played the role of peer to examine the process and results of this project. Peer examination helped to make this study more credible and confirmable. To check dependability, I used member checking after interviewing the tutor and the students. Finally, I showed the findings to the tutor. After an exhaustive process of data analysis, the findings of this study took shape. They are presented in the following section.

Findings

This section elaborates on the findings of this study. This includes evidences of how this group of students manifested autonomy or the lack of it in this virtual reading comprehension course and what factors influenced students positively and negatively along the course. For the purpose of this section, I divide this chapter into three topics. The first part illustrates the ways students developed and exercised their autonomy at the initial, middle and last stage of the course. The second part describes the role played by the teacher in the promotion of learner autonomy. And, finally, the third part presents the factors that affected students on their exercise of autonomy in this virtual environment.

The Exercise of Students' Autonomy through the Development of the Course

Insights from the data show that these students not only manifested some behaviors and attitudes associated with autonomy, but they also showed behaviors that could be related to the lack of it. Students' behaviors and manifestations of autonomy changed throughout the development of the course. While students at the initial stage of the course manifested motivation and interest in learning English, they were very much limited by their little computer skills and difficulties to manage the platform, which necessarily lead towards higher dependence on the teacher and little exercise of autonomy. Then, after some weeks, the students kept high levels of dependence on the teacher's guidance and their exercise of autonomy was limited because of the multiple responsibilities students had outside of the course. These problematic conditions and situations experienced at this middle stage of the course highly affected students' exercise of autonomy in language

learning by driving students to not accomplishing their tasks on time, not taking their time to use the platform and interact with others, and sometimes, even ask some external people to do the assignments for them. However, by the end of the course some students evidenced a numbers of behaviors associated with autonomy in language learning, including more confidence in taking risks when doing the assignments, providing feedback to others in the platform, working collaboratively, monitoring their progress, and using meta-cognitive strategies to improve their learning. In the following paragraphs each stage of the course is described in detail making the connection to learner autonomy.

Initial stage of the course.

Insights from data indicate that at the beginning of the course students felt motivated to start the class, but expressed anxiety, fear of managing the platform, and difficulties in understanding assignments. In this initial stage, students demonstrated their interest and motivation when introducing themselves in the virtual forum. They expressed their desire to do their best in the course and have a good experience when learning English in the new virtual environment. As one of the students manifested to the rest of class through the forum: “I want to learn and enjoy this course” (Forum 10/03). However, while they felt motivated towards the class, they also felt worried and nervous to face this experience. As the tutor stated in her interview: “They are frightened at the beginning, maybe because they are not getting used to working alone” (Teacher’s interview p.5).

Yet, not only during the first week but also during the subsequent ones, students showed high dependence on the teacher’s guidelines and support and exerted little autonomy. Besides messages of welcoming and introducing, there were several messages

about asking for guidance. That kind of messages were written not only during the first weeks, but also continued until the end of the course but less regularly. Data from the forum show that most of the students depended on the teacher's support and guidance. The teacher expressed that students wanted her to be there all the time and they preferred receiving guidelines directly from her than reading instructions on the platform. The following excerpt illustrates this: "One knows that they get anxious when they do not receive an immediate answer. They get desperate, maybe because they feel they are working alone. (...) One has to be there accompanying them" (Teacher's interview, p.3). Students' feelings such as anxiety and fear of working alone, which were identified and described by the teacher, show a lack of independence. On the other hand, the students pointed out that they often asked the teacher for guidance, mainly in the first weeks where they were learning how to manage the platform. As claimed by a student: "I often wrote to the teacher when I had questions or problems, but it was more common at the beginning" (Student 7, p.2).

During this same period, another fact that reflected students' dependence on the teacher was found in the data. Students often communicated exclusively with her, but not necessarily with the whole class as it should be expected in a virtual platform. Almost 75% of the messages found in the forum were evidence of the communication from a single student to the teacher and from the teacher to a single student. The following message, in which the student addresses the message directly to the tutor, not to the whole class, as it should be in an interactive forum, illustrates this pattern: "Good morning teacher, although I know you do not answer on Sunday I want to know when you are going to evaluate the exam of the module 1" (Forum, 27/03). Additionally, most of the interviewees maintained

that they used the forum to communicate with the teacher and almost never to interact among them.

Dependence on the teacher as little exercise of autonomy is also found not only in this stage but also later when students usually asked for guidance. Insights from the data reveal that the students often needed the teacher's support, showing their dependence and making her the provider and the main character in the course. The information from the forum and the interviews indicates that the students communicated mainly to ask for guidance. Most of the interviewees noted that they often wrote to the teacher with this purpose. When they did not find or understand an assignment or when the platform got blocked in the middle of a test, they usually wrote to the teacher for a solution. Concerning the forum, their messages were related to the development of the course, instructions for assignments, doubts concerning grades, management of the platform, and reporting technical problems. The following comments give evidence of this: "Is that one my final grade? It looks weird. Did I understand the exercise in a wrong way?"(Forum 22/03). Similarly, the teacher pointed out that students wrote to her for asking for guidance and support. According to her, they demanded a lot of attention and supervision. In her interview she discussed: "sometimes instructions are not clear enough for them, they need you to be there all the time, and they want to know things from you" (Teacher's interview, p.8).

To sum up, while students at this initial stage of the course manifested motivation and interest in learning English, they were very much limited by their little computer skills and difficulties to manage the platform, which necessarily lead towards higher dependence on the teacher and little exercise of autonomy. As explained in this section, data indicated that students depended a lot on the teacher's support and used the platform mainly for this

purpose. Questions and comments were mostly addressed to her and their need to be guided was permanent, which confirms that students perceived the teacher as the main actor of the course. Hence, their high level of dependence shows an attitude that does not allow students to develop autonomy, since students do not have any control over the learning process, instead the teacher is the one who controls and leads.

Middle stage of the course.

The analysis of data at the middle stage of the course confirms that not only students continued to experience the difficulties with the platform and the assignments described above, which derived into high levels of dependence on the teacher's guidance, but their exercise of autonomy was limited because of the multiple responsibilities students had outside of the course. These multiples responsibilities were complemented by students' limitation in planning and managing their time, and the number of assignments required by the course, which most of the students considered excessive, considering their condition of graduate students and workers. These problematic conditions and situations experienced at this middle stage of the course highly affected students' exercise of autonomy in language learning by driving students to not accomplishing their tasks on time, not taking their time to use the platform and interact with others, and sometimes, even ask some external people to do the assignments for them.

So, as it was clear in the data at this middle stage, students seldom interacted among themselves and kept communicating with the teacher. For example, information from the forum demonstrated that messages from a student to another student and from a student to the whole group were inferior in number than the messages from a student to the teacher.

Furthermore, most of the students in the interview claimed that they rarely interacted with the rest of the group using the forum. Some explained that they had no time to spend writing comments, whereas others expressed that everyone was apart. An extract from a student's interview illustrates this: "I think the forum was very impersonal. There are other English courses where people interact more, it was very individualistic" (student 4, p.3).

On the other hand, the data indicated that during the weeks of this phase, most of the students had difficulty to manage their time and although they accomplished with all the assignments, they felt pressed and anguished because of the amount of assignments they had to do. All the students expressed in their interview and some in the forum that they were very busy and had little time to study. They made a big effort to pass the course and felt that they had worked harder than in other subjects. That is the reason why most of them found this experience exhausting. An example of this is illustrated in the following excerpt: "I am a responsible person despite all my duties, but it was complicated for everyone, workshops with more than twenty questions, repetitive things, it was always our complaint" (Student 1, p.1). Moreover, the teacher also affirmed that this group was made of very busy people, they work, have families and study, so they often complained about the amount of tasks they had to do for the course. One example of this is the following: "This is a service that the institution offers them. It is not our fault that they are married, have children and two or three jobs; they have to learn how to manage their time" (Teacher's interview, p.4). Further, when the tutor explained in her interview that some students asked for an extension in the deadlines, they manifested not having enough time to study during the week. She maintained: "They will always ask you to extend the deadlines, and they are always the same, because they have been very busy" (Teacher's interview, p.7).

On the top of students' difficulty with time management found during this period, another behavior was discovered in the data. Most of the students manifested that they neither studied nor used English out of the course. In the interview for example, six of the seven students argued that they did not look for other materials to study or practice English. They justified their behavior saying that the course had plenty of activities to do and that they had no time to explore by their own. Besides, they were very busy and felt under pressure to submit assignments on time. The following extract from one of the interviews exemplifies this: "I limited my work to the material of the course. I have to confess that I did not study with other sources" (Student 5, p.2). On the other hand, the tutor expressed that she did not believe that her students spent time studying on their own using other resources and materials, because they were too busy and often complained for the amount of assignments; therefore, it was not logical that they studied extra time. She asserted in her interview: "They never expressed to have studied or used English in their field or another context different from this course" (Teacher's interview, p.10). Further, the insights from the questionnaire indicate that the only 10% of the students studied English on their own using other material different from those of the course. For instance, they read newspapers and texts of their field in English. Consequently, it is evident that most of the students in the group did not take control over materials, because they did not look for additional resources to study and learn English. In contrast, most of the students assumed that the course materials they were provided on the platform were enough. On the other hand, the students could not make any decision about the material and kind of activities on the platform. Hence, both the lack of control over materials and activities inside and outside the course are linked to the lack of autonomy, since they do not decide about what and how they want to learn.

Furthermore, it was found in this stage that many students not only resigned themselves with the materials provided, but also asked other people to do assignments for them. For instance, five of the seven interviewees manifested that they often needed help from relatives, friends and English teachers to understand texts and, sometimes, to do the assignments for them. This behavior reflects a certain lack of autonomy in the sense that these students were not self-conscious and responsible enough to do the course by themselves, maybe they worried more about passing the course than learning. Besides, the lack of self-consciousness linked to the lack of autonomy is seen when the students do not assume the role of active learners, they show neither interest in learning and nor dedication to take advantage of the course. When the interviewees were asked about what kind of help they received from others, they said that those people sometimes did the assignments for them. It would seem that the students of this group felt afraid or felt they were not able to do the activities alone, maybe they felt insecure and anxious as the teacher described them in her interview: “They are frightened, maybe because of the teaching system they are used to” (Teacher’s interview, p.11).

Because of their lack of independence not only in the initial stage but also at the middle of the course, some of these students also showed some difficulties to solve problems. When managing the platform, some felt anxious and some got angry when they neither understood instructions nor received an immediate answer from the teacher. This behavior demonstrates that some students of the group showed little evidence of solving problems by themselves. In contrast, they often asked the teacher for support and guidance. According to her, most of the students wanted to be informed by her about how to do assignments and deal with the platform; they rarely tried to explore options and solution by their own. She argued about it: “If the file does not open, or they are confused about an

assignment, one has to be there, if you are not, they get desperate and this becomes a problem” (teacher’s interview p. 3). This is how some of these students not only needed the teacher to solve technical and academic problems for them, but also needed their relatives and friends to help in doing the assignments.

In summary, and as a consequence of a number of factors such as students’ lack of time, number of assignments in the course, and difficulties with the platform, students in the middle of the course continued to perpetuate behaviors associated with dependency and not necessarily autonomy. At the same time, it was also found that some of the students asked others to do their assignments, which shows their many difficulties in dealing with the course duties by themselves. In the final stage of the course some of these difficulties began to be overcome by the students.

Last stage of the course.

Although some negative attitudes were identified in students not only at the beginning but also in the middle stage of the course, including high dependence on the teacher, difficulty with time management, lack of practice out of the course, and difficulty to do assignment by themselves, by the end of the course evidenced a numbers of behaviors associated with autonomy in language learning, including more confidence in taking risks when doing the assignments, providing feedback to others in the platform, working collaboratively, monitoring their progress, and using meta-cognitive strategies to improve their learning. As it was clear in the analysis of data, at this latter stage of the course students had a better command over the platform and the course in general and this allowed them to perform more effectively and behave more autonomously in different aspects.

However, while students improved in many aspects and manifested their satisfaction with the course, they also agreed on stating that they preferred face to face instruction rather than virtual education courses as this type of modality more closely responds to their needs and possibilities as adults, graduate students, and workers. This section elaborates on these findings.

The analysis of the forum showed that at the advanced stage of the course some students started to feel more confident in taking some risks and cooperating with others. They moved from interacting only with the teacher in the platform, to communicating with their peers and supporting each other in the assignments. This is how some students started to guide others about how to find materials and assignments on the platform and others gave clarification about how the evaluation worked. Helping others to understand reflects an attitude associated with autonomy, because it is a sign of taking initiative, having an active role in the learning process, distributing leadership in the class, and learning collaboratively. Likewise, the teacher expressed that although the students of this group did not interact enough, some of them tried to help others from time to time when they felt lost or could not find assignments. She argued in her interview: “Some helped among them, sometimes before I answered; there had already been a comment by a student providing guidance” (Teacher’s interview, p.7). Like the teacher pointed out, a pair of students in the interview asserted that they answered back some messages when they knew what to do, in that sense they helped their classmates providing guidance. This excerpt cites a case in point: “She had the same doubt and the teacher had already answered me, so I asked her not to worry and be patient about the feedback” (Student 4, p.3).

Insights from the questionnaire administered at the end of the course also allow us to confirm that these higher levels of students’ interaction and risk taking were complemented

with learners' commitment with the course. As it was confirmed by the students, 95% of them think they were committed with the course, while most of the interviewees expressed they were responsible, dedicated and worked hard. In one of the interviews a student argued: "I do not have any difficulty, I was disciplined and studied a lot doing the assignments" (Student 5, p.1). Furthermore, the teacher reported that thirty three of the thirty six students passed the course; at this stage, she defined them as responsible and dedicated: "They are critical, analytical and responsible people" (Teacher's interview, p.5).

Additionally, while students reported higher levels of commitment with the course at this stage, they also started to use the platform to report on their progress, another evidence of self-monitoring as a meta-cognitive strategy. As this latter stage the teacher affirmed that some students had written in the forum to account for their progress, inform about the assignments they were doing, and express how they felt and what they had learned. The following excerpt exemplifies this: "At the last stage of the course some students expressed that they were able to read texts" (Teacher's interview, p.10). According to the data, these particular students manifested behaviors related to autonomy by the extent to which meta-cognitive strategies were used. For instance, they were aware of what they had learned and reported their progress.

At the last stage of the course, students also expressed satisfaction about the course. In the survey for example, 96% reported that the course was good and interesting. Similar comments were also found in the forum but particularly in the latest dates of the course as illustrated in the following extract: "I have already finished the assignments and the test; I think this unit was very nice and interesting" (Forum 10/04). This kind of comments in which students qualified the course with positive adjectives were commonly written at the end of the course, because at this stage, they had become more familiarized with the

platform and the tasks, and enjoyed the course more. The teacher also confirmed that at the beginning everything was more difficult for them because it was an adaptation period to understand how both the platform and the activities worked. She commented about it in her interview: “At the beginning they were anxious and fearful, but at the end, they realized they were able to work by themselves” (Teacher’s interview, p.5). This manifestation of gaining confidence shows that some students of this group overcame difficulties, improved in their performance, and contributed to create a learning environment characterized by peer interaction, support, risk taking, confidence, and satisfaction, which at the end favors students development and exercise of autonomy.

In addition to expressing satisfaction, the insights from the questionnaire and some interviews indicate that at the end of the course, many students thought the course was good and felt they had learned. 94% of the respondents of the questionnaire assured that they learned a lot. Also, four out of seven interviewees claimed that they had learned and developed abilities to understand a text. As one student stated during the interview: “One learns a lot; you do not know how many English courses I have taken and I could not finish any of them, but this virtual course worked for me” (Student 7, p.2). Moreover, the teacher stated that at the end of the course, some students wrote to her expressing their gratitude and satisfaction because they felt they learned a lot. In her interview she asserted: “Finally they said that they really learned, that the course was nice and it was possible to pass it” (Teacher’s interview, p.5).

Despite the fact that many students maintained that they liked and learned in the course, there were other opinions about the process found during this phase. Although it seems that the majority of the group manifested that they learned much, three out of the seven students who were interviewed argued that they had not learned enough. They agreed

on saying that the course had many assignments and little time to assimilate such amount of information. Besides, they were too busy, so they neither did assignments consciously nor took their time to learn as they should have done it. In his interview a student stated: “In fact we were given a certificate, but it is a lie that we learned everything” (Student 4, p.1). About this same issue the teacher argued that this group was specifically limited to submit assignments and it became a very mechanical process: “This group was very busy, they always complained about the lack of time, I know that some did not do the course consciously because they were overloaded” (Teacher’s interview, p.6).

Further, at this last stage of the course most of the students manifested skepticism about learning a language in a virtual course. Data showed that a part of the group was not convinced of the effectiveness of learning English in the virtual modality. Although the information gained from the questionnaire indicated that 93% of the group liked to study English in the virtual modality, in the interview, five of the seven students pointed out that they still preferred in-person rather than virtual courses. Most of them asserted that English should be learned face to face, especially to develop communicative skills. A clear example of this perception is the following: “Obviously in-person education is better since one is there with the teacher” (Student 6, p.2). This comment could reflect how important the tutor becomes when learning a foreign language. According to some students, the teacher is needed to learn. On the other hand, only two out of the seven students think that English can be learned in virtual courses if one is committed with the process. According to them, learning English in the virtual modality is not for everyone. One of these two students stated: “I think it depends a lot on the student’s commitment, if one is disciplined and wants to learn, one can learn in both virtual and in-person courses” (Student 5, p.3). There appears to be something of a contradiction here in that the questionnaire data shows that

almost all the students like to study English in the virtual modality. In contrast, data from the interviews reveal that most of them prefer face to face instruction.

Although insights from both the survey and the interviews show a contradiction about if the students prefer in-person classes to virtual ones, there is a fact that evidences that most of the students of this course were in some way reluctant to learn in virtual environments. Data showed that they had difficulties to assume the role of virtual students when they used the e-mail to communicate with the tutor instead of the forum, a tool that promotes interaction in virtual courses. According to the teacher, students wrote to her more by e-mail than through the forum and although the students used the forum, she received more messages by e-mail. This also shows the difficulty students have to use the forum as the tool for communication. In her interview, the teacher points out: “The students of this group did not use the forum enough. They limited to read the theory and submit assignments; it was a very mechanical process. They preferred to communicate directly with me by e-mail (Teacher’s interview, p.2). In addition, students who were interviewed argued that they did not use the forum enough. Most of them expressed that they use the forum less than the e-mail to ask about an assignment, a grade or a technical problem .One of the students asserted in her interview: “If we had a question, we wrote to the tutor and she answered us immediately, she read our e-mails on weekend” (student 6, p.3).

To conclude, despite students continued manifesting dependency but in a lower scale, by the end of the course some students evidenced a numbers of behaviors associated with autonomy in language learning, including more confidence in taking risks when doing the assignments, providing feedback to others in the platform, working collaboratively, monitoring their progress, and using meta-cognitive strategies to improve their learning. Nevertheless, data from the interviews revealed two things. First, some students did not

learn as they expected. Second, some prefer face to face instruction to virtual education. In the coming sections I elaborate on some of these findings in connection with the role of the teacher in the promotion of autonomy, and some factors associated with the development of autonomy.

The Teacher as a Key Actor in the Promotion of Learner Autonomy

According to the data, the teacher's role favored students in a certain way to manifest autonomy. The way the teacher performed helped students to feel progressively comfortable and confident. Insights from data show that most of the students considered this course difficult and frustrating at the beginning. However, the interviewees claimed that the teacher was always present, providing them with what they needed. A perception found in the data is that most of the students think their teacher was responsible and kind. In their interview, most of them asserted that she was excellent, because she always provided them with all the guidance they needed. For instance, she answered all the messages on time and gave instructions clearly. In the interview, a student stated: "She was very helpful and dedicated, she was always there" (student 6, p.3). Moreover, all the respondents of the questionnaire regarded the teacher as responsible. Finally, data gathered from the forum also show this: "Thanks teacher for your recommendations" (Forum 31/03). The teacher's qualities helped students to feel more comfortable; her attitude encouraged students to keep motivated and finish the course. Therefore, they counted on a warming environment where they had the chance to exercise their autonomy because attitudes such as commitment, interest and motivation were enhanced by the teacher.

Additionally, the teacher often encouraged her students in different ways. Information from the forum shows that she sometimes congratulated students for the performance. She highlighted their qualities and motivated them to continue working. The following excerpt gives an example of this: “Congratulations for the commitment and the responsibility you have showed so far” (Forum 12/04). In addition to congratulate them, she encouraged them to participate in the forum: “Please do not forget to share ideas with your classmates. This forum is a space to share with others, if something calls your attention, please write it here” (Forum 29/03). Thus, in her interview, the tutor asserted that she knew she had to encourage her students all the time; her role was of a provider, the person who must be always there encouraging and providing students with all they need. She claimed about it: “When they are lost or blocked, one must be there to push them up” (Teacher’s interview, p.11). Moreover, the tutor helped students to reduce anxiety. A message from the forum explains this: “I like the attitude you have developed toward the course. You must remember that if you are calm, everything can be solved” (Forum 21/03). In her interview, she also emphasized: “One has to ask them to calm down, because with that anger things will not be solved” (Teacher’s interview, p.11).

Besides providing guidance and continuous support, the teacher sometimes suggested sources and activities to enrich the course. Data from the forum indicate that the teacher suggested extra material to reinforce the topics studied. This comment gives an example of this: “Dear students, I suggest watching the following video to better understand the order of adjectives” (Forum 04/05). Also, the interviewees found that the teacher always provided them with other materials different from those from the platform. The following extract from one of the interviews demonstrates this: “The teacher gave both clear explanations and links to practice” (student 7, p.1). On the other hand, she sometimes

suggested strategies for time management. In the forum, messages like this were found: “You must study at least an hour a day; discipline and patience are important in this process” (Forum 16/03). In conclusion, these teacher’s qualities helped students to get motivated, promote their autonomy and succeed in the course, because they were often encouraged and stimulated by their progress. Besides, the example of suggesting other materials outside the platform offered students the chance of looking for other ways to practice and learn English, so the opportunity to decide about exploring and using other materials for learning allowed students to enhance autonomy.

Factors that Affected Students for the Exercise of Autonomy

The analysis of data revealed that although the tutor played a critical role in encouraging students and promoting their autonomy, some factors acted as possible constraints for students to manifest it. These factors are related to the course design and the platform, which limited students to demonstrate behaviors related to autonomy because both guided students to merely accomplish assignments. On the other hand, another important factor that played a crucial role in limiting students’ autonomy has to do with the reason why most of the students take this course: Meeting a requirement for the university instead of learning English for personal or professional interest. These factors are described in this section.

Course design.

Factors such as the length of the assignments, its level of complexity and the mechanical process to develop the course affected learner autonomy. This happened

because the students were limited to do and submit tasks. Besides, they felt pressed, frustrated and discouraged for the amount of activities and lack of time. Most of the students expressed in the individual interview and the forum that the course was very difficult and time consuming. For example, the following extract from one of the interviews illustrates: “I think this course is very hard and advanced” (Interview 4 p.1). Besides, a student wrote in the forum: “To me the development of this module has been exhausting; I have spent almost three hours every day” (Forum 21/03). On the other hand, in her interview, the teacher claimed that students always complained about the level of complexity of the course (Teacher’s interview, p.3, 8). Besides, five of the students interviewed agreed on saying that the course was not designed for beginners because of its complexity. The following excerpt shows this: “This course is designed for people who have some previous knowledge in English” (Student 5, p.1). Overall the data reveal that students really think the course was difficult and time consuming. Students found that there were a lot of assignments which tended to be repetitive and long; concerning this, the teacher argued: “They sometimes say that the course is pretty long, some say nothing and the few who participated said that there were many workshops to do” (Teacher’s interview, p.12). Therefore, the course design limited the students to exercise autonomy since they spent all their time doing assignments which did not imply reflection and decision making, among other attitudes related to autonomy.

The platform.

Students’ perceptions about the platform varied. Some students liked the platform while others did not. For this second group, the platform was an obstacle to learn and

manifest autonomy, because the technical problems affected students' performance and initiative to learn. However, according to the questionnaire, 93% of the students reported that the platform was easy to use. Additionally, two of the seven interviewees claimed that they liked the platform and learned how to use it during the first weeks. At the beginning they asked for guidance about how to find workshops and links, but after some weeks they could manage the platform without any problem. A student asserted in his interview: "The problem at the beginning was how to manage the platform, after one learns, everything is easier" (student 7, p.2).

However, the other five students manifested in their interview that they faced some technical problems. They pointed out that the platform was not practical enough. The following comment demonstrates this: "The platform was kind of inefficient, sometimes slow, there is a lack of functionality; we had to open and close windows for everything" (student 2, p.2). Besides, in the forum there were many messages where students reported technical problems and asked for guidance concerning how to find a task, a link, an exam, or problems with a video. This message in the forum shows this: "I had a problem when playing the video, then the platform got blocked; I lost my first try to the test. Can you help me with this?"(Forum 10/05). Thus, the teacher confirmed that students often wrote messages in the forum and through e-mail to ask for guidance concerning how to manage the platform and deal with technical issues. She maintained: "one has to help them, if they ask for more time because of problems with the platform; one should extend the deadline and be flexible" (Teacher's interview, p.6).

On the other hand, two students out of seven found that the platform had a big amount of texts, few images and no interactive resources. About this, a student asserted in the interview: "I know other platforms that are more interactive and didactic, it has much

text” (student 4, p.2). Further, the teacher reported that a couple of students asked her for activities such as games and songs as part of the course. The following excerpt of her interview demonstrates this: “The only suggestion was to give them some game activities such crossword puzzles and other things; they said that the course had much theory and workshops” (Teacher’s interview, p.5).

To sum up, both the course design and the platform did not favor students to count on an appropriate learning environment where autonomy can be manifested and developed. The type of assignments and the limited functionality of the platform limited students on showing how autonomous they could be.

English as a requirement.

Another issue that affected students to manifest autonomy was the mandatory condition of the course. All the students of this group took this course because it was a requirement for their graduate law studies. Five of the seven interviewees confessed that they did it because it was mandatory to continue in the program. A student claimed: “Many of us neither took advantage nor invested enough time on it. It was merely a requirement” (Student 2, p.2). Besides, the teacher stated: “They need this course as a requirement for the specialization” (Teacher’s interview, p.11).

Despite the mandatory condition of this course, some students expressed to have done it because they liked English. In his interview, a student argued: “Although it was a requirement for the specialization, I like English and I was very interested in the course” (student 3, p.1). To sum up, the course as a prerequisite for graduate programs affected students in the exercise of autonomy because it becomes more of an obligation than a

choice, which definitely reduces students' interest to take control over their own learning. In contrast, they were controlled by an external actor or situation.

A Teacher-Centered Course: The Role the Teacher Had to Play

Both the course design and the platform obliged the teacher to assume a central role in the course. Although the teacher encouraged and supported her students during the entire course, her role was the one of a provider who had the control of everything; in contrast, students assumed the role of receivers, who followed instructions and submitted assignments. They had no control over what and how to learn, because everything was already chosen affecting their exercise of autonomy. The data reveal that the teacher played the most essential role in the course. She always provided guidance and feedback to her students. For example, in the forum, there was a big number of messages where she explained students both assignments and linguistics features. Besides, she gave them support when they had technical problems. In fact, the teacher was who had the highest number of interventions in the forum. The following extract from one of her messages in the forum cites a case in point: "Hello Blanca, a noun does not have all the adjectives seen in the theory; the important thing is that when there are several of them in the same sentence, they must be placed in the right order" (Forum 13/05). The design, the pre-established assignments and the limited web 2.0 tools available on the platform limited both the teacher and the students to position themselves in a suitable and active role. Tasks such as completing charts with the information of a text, multiple choice and cloze exercises, identifying word categories in a text and inferring meaning from pictures or titles forced both the students to answer questionnaires and the teacher to check and send

feedback. Therefore, the structure of the course did not allow the students to be active performers, because they cannot decide on the content, the tasks and the evaluation.

An analysis of the findings brings to discussion the need of promoting autonomy in virtual education. In the following section this reflection is developed.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how the students of a virtual EFL reading comprehension course manifest autonomy. The following discussion will focus on interpreting the findings of this study in the light of theory. Besides, I will reflect on the role of virtual platforms and the tutor to enhance learner autonomy. Also, I will analyze how students' perceptions toward virtual education influence on the exercise of autonomy.

Virtual Courses Designed to Enhance Learner Autonomy

It is clear from the study that students had to submit assignments and pass tests provided on the platform. They did not have the opportunity to take control over the content, the methodology and the evaluation of the course, actions that could include students in decision making and the development of autonomy (Rivers, 2001). The findings show that neither the teacher nor the students participated on the construction of the syllabus. In contrast, all the tasks were established in advanced without any negotiation among the parts. Therefore, the course did not take into account students' needs, interests, background and capabilities, but it imposed a syllabus. That is why many of these students think that the course was just a requirement to pursuit graduate studies which demanded much from them, because of its complexity and length; features that caused them stress and anguish.

This study confirms the necessity to review teaching pedagogies in favor of learner autonomy in the virtual context. If teaching entities are aware of students' role in virtual education and provide them with the elements to learn by themselves, they will have more opportunities to exercise autonomy and learn in the way they choose. If a language course

is designed under the constructivist notion of autonomy, students will count on an environment where they can manifest attitudes and behaviors linked to autonomy such as self-direction (Rivers, 2001), critical reflection, motivation (Deci, 1996), decision making, independent action (Little, 1991), self confidence and self-government (Benson, 1997). An example of this is seen when a virtual course provides students with e-learning activities and web 2.0 tools that allow them to interact, socialize, make connections and reflect, qualities associated with connectivism. A course where students are only asked to do and submit assignments does not open possibilities to interact and construct knowledge. It is necessary that virtual language courses equip students with a methodology which involves decision making, critical thinking and community building.

Connectivism needs to be present as the construct of virtual courses. In the case of language learning, a virtual course designed under the principles of connectivism empowers students to make decisions and transform reality (Siemens, 2006, p.31). Thus, students are encouraged to reflect, make connections, create and communicate using technology (Ibid, p.34). However, as it is seen in this case, students could not develop such qualities or abilities while doing assignments and practicing the language. In contrast, they limited to answer questionnaires and interpret texts.

To sum up, virtual language courses need to be designed with multiple options and tasks that enhance reflection and language production. Also, they need to target all learning styles and supply considerably students' needs and interests in order to encourage them to learn in the way they choose promoting creativity and decision making. In this course, students did not have the chance to decide about the topics they wanted to read. In contrast, they were assigned topics and tasks under the assumption that they all had the same language proficiency level, interests and needs. Perhaps they would have been more

interested in learning English online if the readings provided had been more attractive to them and adapted to their language level since the findings show that most of the students complained about the level of complexity and length of the tasks. This study reveals the need of reflecting and planning when designing virtual language courses. In this process it is important to focus on proposing activities and tasks that promote the development of reflection, self government, decision making, collaboration, creativity among other qualities related to constructivism and connectivism.

Teacher's Role for the Promotion of Learner Autonomy

This study reveals that the teacher played the role of a provider, who supported students with all the guidance they needed and encouraged them to succeed. However, the way the course was designed demanded her to be the only one who took control over the content and the evaluation. The teacher was forced to not include students when making decisions; in contrast, they were assigned tasks and imposed deadlines when submitting tests. When the teacher is the one who controls everything like is seen in this study, opportunities for students to exercise autonomy are very low since they cannot make choices concerning what and how to learn. Teachers and course designers who do not create opportunities for making students think, interact and construct using the foreign language reflect learning assumptions far from autonomy, since they still want to take control over students' learning.

Teachers and course designers should adopt a student-centered approach in the design of the virtual learning environment in order to position students as the main characters in the process. Virtual teachers need to be aware of students' background and individual

differences that influence the way they learn; hence, courseware materials must be varied and adjusted to students' needs. An autonomous teacher should promote on students the development of mental capacities such as reflection, critical thinking and self-government, capacities that are associated to autonomy. Therefore, the teacher should consider the design of an online environment where students feel they make both choices and decisions about what and how they want to learn (Benson, 2001, p.24). For instance, the teacher can propose students to design a learning plan where they decide what topics they want to study and the deadlines to submit evidences of learning. Also, the teacher can provide a list of topics and tasks where students can choose the ones they like the most and work on developing the same language skills in different ways. Another example of the promotion of attitudes that leads to the development of autonomy is seen in Kurtis (2008), where students had the opportunity to learn Greek in a virtual academic writing course using free writing, so they could choose what they wanted to write.

Besides the need of adopting a student-centered approach in language virtual courses for the development of autonomy, it is important that virtual teachers abandon some prejudices about online education. As it was found in this study, the teacher expressed that her students needed her guidance and support all the time. Besides, she argued that they were sometimes unable to succeed by themselves and depended a lot on her supervision. Although these facts became true from the teacher's experience in this case, these assumptions can be also seen as prejudices, because they predisposed and prevent the teacher to see her students in a different way. Teachers that work in virtual environments need to leave prejudices about virtual education and open their mind to think that English can be learned in the virtual modality. Despite the findings of this study show that most of the students believe that English is learned through face to face instruction better than

online, teachers should be convinced that this second modality can be also effective. A current problem in our context is that many teachers still believe that it is harder for students to learn a language in a virtual course than in a face to face one. Therefore, they become affected and predisposed by this assumption and perpetuate these kind of beliefs on students.

Moreover, Teachers should stop assuming that students are often reluctant to learn English online. Although data show that many students of this group preferred face to face instruction, it is common to see that before having the experience; teachers usually assume that students are not prepared yet to face virtual education. Consequently, such kind of beliefs limited both teachers and students to meet their goals. Despite a significant number of students still believe that English can be learned easily in face to face classes as it was found in this case, teachers should be the first in believing that a language can be learned in such environment. As teachers, it is important to consider both: Promote students' self-confidence and empower them in decision making. Teachers need to believe that their students are able to succeed. It is known that students may tend to develop autonomy if the teacher believes in it and provides them with a learning environment where they become the main characters.

Besides being aware of the adoption of a student-centered approach and the possible prejudices concerning virtual education, teachers need training in the field. In order that teachers promote autonomy for language learning, they need as Pegrum (2009) denotes: “Demystify computing” (p.32) and it becomes possible if teachers are prepared for the technological challenge. They need to learn how to master and implement web 2.0 in their virtual courses with the purpose of providing students with a learning environment based

on interaction. They need to choose the appropriate technological gadgets that support communicative networking and community building (Ibid, p.33). Therefore, if elements like those are taken into account by teachers and course designers when creating virtual language courses, students will take for granted the development of autonomy which in turn will facilitate learning.

Students' Perceptions towards Virtual Education and their Influence on Student Autonomy

This case study shows that although many students think that this virtual course was good and interesting, a significant number of them still believe that face to face instruction is a better option for learning a language. Additionally, they still believe that the teacher is the main character of the scene and that learning depends a lot on him/her. Some students of this group still believe that the role of the teacher is essential for them to learn; and as the tutor stated, they felt alone in some way in the virtual context, so they assume that learning a language through a virtual environment is harder than learning in a face to face course.

So, students also have a challenging role in virtual education. They need to position themselves as the main characters in their learning process. It is still seen that students in both traditional and virtual classes make the teacher responsible for learning. The process itself according to them, need to be led by the teacher who has the control over everything. In contrast, virtual education promotes students' empowerment. Here they have opportunities to make choices and learn what they want and how they want, and this is what autonomy is about. In virtual learning environments language students find the need to plan, monitor and evaluate their process, all those meta-cognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.137). Lai (2001, p.35) states that such strategies are processes of control.

The nature of the virtual context demands students to create or develop strategies for learning. It is supposed that they are who decide when and how to study. Therefore, it is a way to show how they take control over their learning.

An empirical study such Cuasialpud (2010) also found that students manifested levels of anxiety and frustration towards learning English online. It seems that learning a foreign language through the virtual modality has become a challenge for some people. Moreover, findings of this study also show that although students think a virtual course is practical for busy people, it is not as effective as a face to face language course. Consequently, such kind of beliefs may negatively influence on students to develop autonomy because they nourish feelings that obtrude the possibility to learn by themselves in the virtual modality.

If virtual education is gaining an important position in institutions all around the world it is because it can provide many advantages such as reducing expenses of resources and place. Besides, it offers the possibility to study wherever and whenever, breaking the limitations of place and time. Studies like this show that virtuality allows busy people to pursuit their studies easily because they can study late at night from home. All the benefits virtual education provides demands that students break the traditional paradigm of learning in a classroom and face the control over their learning process in a new environment.

Young generations may be more open-minded towards virtual education because they have had more contact with technology since an early age, and that experience could facilitate learning. In contrast, most adults resist this modality and that is why learning seems to be more difficult. Therefore, it is recommended that learners open their mind to this experience and institutions promote its acceptance offering them language courses where they learn while exercising autonomy.

Conclusions

This study aimed at examining how a group of graduate students manifest autonomy in a virtual reading comprehension course at a public university. The results of this study indicate that the students manifested attitudes and behaviors associated with both autonomy and lack of it. In other words, it was seen that most of them showed attitudes that lead to autonomy such as motivation and commitment at the beginning, but they also manifested high levels of dependence and lack of self-confidence. Later, they became more confident and performed more independently at the end of the course, two attitudes close to autonomy. On the other hand, some students maintained their preference of learning English in face to face instruction, because they considered it more efficient due to the teacher's physical support. It can be concluded that the findings demonstrate that these students have not believed yet that a foreign language can be learned through the virtual modality. They think that a lot of responsibility and commitment are needed to succeed in a virtual language course and they do not feel prepared to face this challenge.

On the other hand, this study found that there were some factors that facilitated and affected students in the exercise of autonomy. For instance, the way the teacher performed during the entire course favored students, because her attitudes created a favorable atmosphere for students to communicate and learn. Her encouragement and support make them more confident and motivated to carry out the course. On the other hand, there were other factors that affected students to manifest autonomy. The course design, the platform and the teacher-centered approach limited students since they did not have the opportunity to reflect, construct and make choices concerning their learning process.

As Benson (1997) states: “Autonomy is an important quality to develop in education” (p.18). When students are provided with opportunities to develop autonomy, they also count on opportunities to learn in a more significant way. In the context of virtual language courses, learning could be more effective if students were exposed to develop attitudes and behaviors that lead to autonomy. I hope that the findings of the study shed light on the issues of learner autonomy in virtual education.

There is still much left for future research to investigate. Two directions for future research seem particularly appropriate. First, because of the fact that students are still skeptical to learn a language through the virtual modality and they prefer face to face instruction instead, a direction worth pursuing for the future research is to see how virtual language courses can be designed breaking the traditional model of assigning and submitting workshops. Instead of that, it is necessary to build a methodology where interaction, reflection and creativity enhance the development of autonomy which in turn facilitates learning.

Second, due to autonomy should not be limited to some specific ruling behaviors; in contrast, such behaviors do not always correspond each other (Benson, 2010, p.84) and autonomy can be reflected through different attitudes and actions. For this reason, research about observable and non observable behaviors related to this quality should be more explored.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged some limitations of this case. First, the result of this study was based on a small number of samples. Second, the study was conducted on the graduate students at a public institution, whose personality, motivational needs might differ from those in other places. As a result, it did not enhance the generalizability of the study and the findings might not apply in every school setting.

To conclude, this case study shows that a group of graduate students of a virtual reading comprehension course did not manifest clear behaviors or attitudes related to autonomy at the first stage of the course such as dependence and lack of confidence. However, some of them started to manifest behaviors that lead to autonomy after some weeks such as cooperation and self-monitoring, while others kept the same behaviors from the beginning until the end of the course. They assumed a passive role and limited to submit assignments. Therefore, the findings reveal that the design, the platform and the role that both the teacher and the students assumed during the course influenced on how students exercise their autonomy.

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APPENDIX 1

STUDENTS' INTERVIEW

This appendix shows the questions used in the semi-structure interview for the students

Sobre el curso

1. ¿Qué podría decir sobre el curso de competencia lectora virtual?
2. ¿Con qué fin hizo el curso?

Sobre la autonomía

3. Para aprender a través de un curso virtual se requiere y es importante que el estudiante sepa manejar su tiempo. ¿Cómo se ve usted con relación a esto?
4. También se debe trabajar por fuera del curso, es decir no solo conformarse con los temas y las actividades propuestas en el curso. ¿Cómo fue su desempeño en este punto?
5. Se asume que un estudiante autónomo es quien trabaja sin necesidad de una permanente supervisión del tutor, ¿Cómo vio usted al grupo en general en relación a esto?
6. Un estudiante autónomo se reconoce también porque tiene habilidades para la comunicación y coopera con otros en el aprendizaje. ¿Hizo usted algo de esto durante el curso?
7. ¿Cómo fue su desempeño en las primeras semanas en comparación con las últimas semanas del curso?
8. ¿De qué manera cree usted que el curso lo benefició?

¿Qué piensa usted de estudiar inglés de manera virtual comparado con la formación presencial?

APPENDIX 2

CUESTIONARIO PARA LOS ESTUDIANTES

Estudio: La autonomía del estudiante en un curso virtual de inglés.

Estudiantes de competencia lectora,

Como me presenté en el foro de su curso, Mi nombre es Paula Andrea Bedoya, como estudiante de la maestría en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, estoy haciendo mi trabajo de investigación en la línea de autonomía en ambientes virtuales. Les solicito muy comedidamente llenar esta encuesta. A través de este medio, busco conocer como los estudiantes del curso virtual de competencia lectora en inglés de la Universidad de Antioquia manifiestan su autonomía. Basada en este diagnóstico, busco reflexionar sobre cómo se podría promover el aprendizaje autónomo en la virtualidad.

Para su tranquilidad, les informo que esta información tendrá un carácter confidencial y sólo la conoceremos mi asesor de tesis y yo. Por esto, les solicitamos responder las preguntas con absoluta sinceridad.

Mil gracias

Paula Andrea Bedoya

Estudiante de la maestría en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.

El propósito de este cuestionario: En este cuestionario usted responderá voluntariamente preguntas relacionadas con su rol de estudiante virtual en el programa competencia lectora en inglés para postgrados.

Marque con una X la frecuencia con la que hace cada actividad.

	Siempre	Algunas veces	Rara vez	Nunca
Planeo el tiempo que le dedico al curso				
Cumplo con las actividades que debo presentar en la fecha indicada				
Autoevalúo mi desempeño en el curso				
Reflexiono sobre lo que aprendo				
Socializo con otros compañeros las dudas y temas del curso				
Me intereso por la retroalimentación que el tutor me da en cada actividad				
Dedico las horas suficientes para realizar curso a la semana				
Estudio el inglés por fuera del curso				
Soy capaz de trabajar individualmente				
Manejo mi tiempo apropiadamente mientras desarrollo el curso				
Hago preguntas al tutor sobre lo que no entiendo				
Expreso mis opiniones acerca del curso en el foro o por correo				
He logrado mis objetivos y expectativas del curso				
Pienso que soy comprometido con el curso				
Mi opinión sobre el curso es buena				
Me intereso en aprender el inglés en forma virtual				
Necesito la supervisión del tutor para trabajar				
Necesito la ayuda o explicación de un compañero para poder hacer las actividades				
Lo que aprendo en el curso me ha servido para mejorar en mi calidad de vida. Por ejemplo: A nivel académico, laboral o social				
He sugerido a mi tutor algo para mejorar el curso				
Comprendo fácilmente las tareas en la plataforma				
El inglés me ha servido para conocer más sobre el contexto social. Ha enriquecido mi visión del mundo				
El inglés me ha servido para expresar opiniones, emociones e ideas				
Busco información en inglés en Internet				
Controlo mis emociones respecto al aprendizaje. Me siento tranquilo y seguro con mis procedimientos en el curso				
Identifico mis problemas de aprendizaje				
Controlo mi atención mientras trabajo en el curso				