

# Students' profile as autonomous learners in an Internet-based EAP course

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## Abstract

This study aims to find out to what extent university students are able to develop learner autonomy through an EAP course delivered through the Internet. The course, oriented to the use of Internet resources for language learning, was designed specifically to foster learner autonomy. Based on a previous exploratory study (Arnó et al. 2003), this research seeks to refine the profile of the autonomous learner initially developed and to discover which specific actions and attitudes related to learner autonomy are found in students' behaviour. Thus, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we carried out an analysis of the autonomous behaviour displayed by students when using different Internet resources through activities designed to foster learner autonomy. This study has allowed us to outline the profile of autonomous learners in a virtual classroom, with students who are able to take the initiative and make decisions on the organization and management of their learning process. Focusing on the connection between making the most of the Internet and developing students' autonomy, our ultimate aim is to point to ways in which students may be encouraged to become more autonomous and explore the role that the Internet may play in helping us attain this objective.

**Key words:** learner autonomy, online learning, Internet resources, English for Academic Purposes, learning strategies

## Resumen

*Perfil de los estudiantes como aprendices autónomos en un curso de inglés académico a través de Internet*

Con este trabajo se pretende averiguar si los estudiantes universitarios pueden desarrollar su capacidad de aprendizaje autónomo mediante un curso de IFA impartido a través de Internet. El curso, que se centra en el uso de recursos de Internet para el aprendizaje de lenguas, ha sido diseñado específicamente para promover la autonomía en el aprendizaje. Partiendo de un estudio exploratorio previo (Arnó et al. 2003), este artículo pretende definir de una manera más precisa el perfil del aprendiz autónomo desarrollado inicialmente y descubrir qué acciones y actitudes relacionadas con la autonomía en el

aprendizaje muestran los estudiantes. Así, combinando métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos, hemos realizado un análisis del comportamiento autónomo de los estudiantes cuando utilizan recursos de Internet dentro de actividades diseñadas específicamente para la promoción del aprendizaje autónomo. Este estudio nos ha permitido delimitar el perfil de los aprendices autónomos en una aula virtual, mostrando que son capaces de tener iniciativa y tomar decisiones relacionadas con la organización y gestión de su proceso de aprendizaje. Prestando especial atención al nexo de unión que existe entre el aprovechamiento de los recursos de Internet y el desarrollo de la autonomía en el aprendizaje, nuestro objetivo último es encontrar la forma de ayudar a nuestros estudiantes a desarrollar su autonomía, en un proceso en el que Internet juega un papel fundamental.

**Palabras clave:** autonomía en el aprendizaje, aprendizaje en línea, recursos de Internet, Inglés para Fines Académicos, estrategias de aprendizaje.

## Background and Aims of the Study

The important role that Information Technology (IT) is playing nowadays in education, particularly in second language teaching, is made apparent in the number of ways the Internet is increasingly being used as a tool for language learning. In language courses, and especially in Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) contexts, it is common to use the web as source of authentic linguistic data and computer-mediated communication for the exchange of information between learners and teachers. In addition, Internet-based courses are offered to meet specific students' needs in different educational contexts. These practices surely illustrate the potential that the Internet offers for language learning, which has been recently highlighted in the literature (Chun & Plas, 2000; Teeler & Gray, 2000; Warschauer et al., 2000). Indeed, the dynamic nature of the Internet, together with the wide range of materials and resources it offers, makes it a valuable tool for language learning. However, the Internet can also be regarded as a tool to promote learner autonomy; in fact, new learning technologies in a broader sense have been associated to autonomy, since, as it has been claimed, interaction with technology can enhance autonomous behaviour (Benson, 2001).

In comparison with other IT applications, the Internet is considered a more advantageous tool for facilitating autonomous behaviour for two reasons: on the one hand, it offers a wide range of resources from which the learner can benefit, and on the other, the Internet offers a myriad of opportunities for interaction and

collaborative practices. However, it has been argued that students can make the most of the vast amount of resources present in the Internet only if they are aware of their role as learners and are equipped with the necessary tools to exploit those resources for language learning (Kenning, 1996; Little, 1997; Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Along these lines, and in relation to the issue of IT and autonomy, Kenning (1996: 128) also points out that “the provision of choice and opportunities is not enough by itself in that it does no more than set up conditions compatible with autonomy. It is necessary to go beyond that first step and, through learner training, enable students to make informed choices.”

Among the opportunities the Internet offers for interaction and collaboration, we consider the Internet especially valuable for learners and teachers to use different approaches and methods. In particular, by integrating computer-mediated communication into an academic course, students can benefit from getting involved in oral and written communication, since students have the possibility to access tools to become better academic writers, and they can also interact with classmates and instructors in virtual discussion. At the same time, learners can also benefit from the hybrid oral-written genre that is used in computer-mediated communication, for as Warschauer (2002) puts it,

Students need no longer choose between the advantages of speech (which allows rapid interaction) and of writing (which maintains a permanent record for reflection). Rather, using the speech-writing hybrid of computer-mediated discussion, their own discussion takes a written form, thus allowing students' interaction to itself become the basis for epistemic engagement.

Drawing upon these premises and our views on learner autonomy, the present study explores the relationship between the Internet and its potential to promote autonomous behaviour. We report on an ongoing research project which aims to find out whether, and to what extent, university students are able to develop learner autonomy through a virtual EAP course delivered through the Internet. This research is thus based on the participation of students in the course *English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web*, delivered within the *Intercampus* program, which involves the joint offer of virtual elective courses by eight Catalan universities. As an action research project, this study focuses on our students' performance as they work through course activities, ultimately aiming at drawing some conclusions

as to how we can help our students become more autonomous in our own context. The course, with a strong emphasis on the use of Internet resources for language learning, was especially designed to help students become more autonomous learners, that is, to develop skills to control their learning process and get involved in learning about language. We believe that students who develop strategies for initiating and controlling their learning process can continue learning outside the classroom. This can prove to be very useful for university students, who need to develop their language and communicative skills to have a command of English and succeed in the academic and professional world.

Our first step to study how learners could become more autonomous with the help of this course consisted in analysing students' behaviour as they worked through different tasks in the course. Through a qualitative study, we observed some of the actions they could undertake as related to the management of their learning, and we analysed their views and attitudes with regard to language and language learning (Arnó et al., 2003). The results showed that the students taking this course were able to perform a number of self-directed learning actions related to the management of their own learning process, and they could express critical views towards language learning and opinions about the use of the Internet for language learning.

In the light of the results obtained in the previous exploratory study, our intention is now to provide a more accurate picture of students' behaviour as autonomous learners. For this purpose, we aim to refine the profile described in the initial study, by analysing the performance of a larger population of students and redefining the categories identified. It is also our intention to discover which specific actions and attitudes related to learner autonomy are more common in their behaviour, using quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Finally, by analysing their comments and actions, we intend to observe the degree of sophistication exhibited by participants as autonomous learners. Thus, in the remaining sections of this paper, we present our views on learner autonomy, which underlie our observations of students' performance throughout the course. Then, we focus on the analysis we carried out by describing the data and how we obtained them. We finally centre on the students' profile as autonomous learners by identifying certain categories related to their actions and attitudes. The results this analysis yielded are later discussed, and some conclusions are drawn as to how an Internet-based course can help students develop skills for autonomous learning and become more effective learners.

## Learner Autonomy and the Internet

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between IT and learner autonomy has already been suggested in the recent literature (Kenning, 1996; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Benson, 2001; White, 2003). In fact, throughout the history of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), there has been an attempt to encourage a higher degree of learner control over learning processes through the choice of materials and different learning routes (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). However, although CALL applications have been enhanced by multimedia technology, nowadays many CALL materials are still based on the computer as a provider of model answers and solutions to problems, thus not making the most of the learning potential of the technology and even narrowing down the concept of autonomy to the idea of working alone with the computer (Benson, 2001).

With the evolution of technology and in the light of studies on CALL applications, the concept of autonomy has broadened beyond the interaction with technology *per se*. Thanks to the Internet, technology now offers learners new possibilities for interaction, which would not be possible otherwise: interaction with authentic materials and resources they can choose from like a “virtual self-access centre” (Little, 1997), as well as interaction with other learners, peers, and teachers. In this line, it has been argued that in such collaborative environments, with the use of e-mail and on-line discussions, learners find opportunities to direct their own learning, since they are often able to initiate interaction and discussion, assuming control and authority (e.g. Benson, 2001). These are key notions in the research reported in this paper, and this is precisely the context of our study: a course offered in a distance mode that seeks to foster autonomous behaviour and turns out to be especially valuable to observe learners’ development as autonomous students.

Underlying our observations of students’ autonomous behaviour such notions as responsibility, control, learner training, collaboration and critical reflection stand out, which have been recurrent in works on autonomy, whether associated with classroom-based environments or distance education (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Benson, 2001; White, 2003). Specifically, Holec (1981: 3) defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning,” which involves making decisions about different aspects of the language learning process (determining objectives, monitoring progress, or evaluating performance, among

others). Along similar lines, Little (1991: 4) views autonomy as “a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action,” and he adds an essential psychological dimension, which entails that “the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning.”

This conception of autonomy includes some specific skills that the autonomous learner is able to display. We assume that learners show some ability to direct the course of their learning, which implies being able to make decisions concerning course management, organisation and content. Besides, a special attitude is expected from autonomous learners, who actively engage in the learning process. In this sense, learning about language can help students take informed decisions and make the most of their learning as highly skilled learners. In practice, autonomy involves being reflective about one’s learning and taking the initiative to explore, to find possible solutions, and to contrast results. Thus, according to our views, learner autonomy is ultimately reflected through a series of skills, which we seek to foster in the course. These include assessing needs, establishing objectives, monitoring progress, evaluating and choosing materials, reflecting on learning, and providing self-assessment.

Promoting learners’ skills and ability has been crucial in relation to learner autonomy, and so the importance of learner training to the fostering of autonomous behaviour has been emphasized in the literature (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Kenning, 1996; Benson, 2001; White, 2003). Students need to be familiar with learning strategies so that they can find out which ones are more appropriate to direct their own learning, that is, to help them focus on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn. In relation to distance learning and distributed environments, promoting learning strategies is regarded as necessary, for, as mentioned earlier, technology by itself cannot support the development of skills associated with autonomy. Hurd (2000: 63) points out that “conscious selection and self-directed involvement, both features of strategies, ... are also characteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance, therefore, to the needs of distance language learners.” She further adds that, “for distance learners, left to a large extent to their own devices, it could be that metacognitive knowledge and development of metacognitive skills are not only an essential part of effective learning but also a pre-requisite to it.” In line with this, we believe that if students are to become more effective learners, emphasis should be placed on training them to develop the ability to make choices about learning, as well as to

become more reflective, critical and willing to experiment. In keeping with Ellis and Sinclair's (1989) views, we believe that students need information about language, the learning process, and themselves as language learners, to become aware not only of language but also of learning techniques and processes.

More recently, emphasis has been placed on learner training and autonomy in relation to material design and resource-based approaches (Benson, 2001; Hurd et al., 2001; White, 2003). Through task design, learners are encouraged to reflect on their learning process, and they are provided with opportunities to display autonomous behaviours. In this line, the students in our course are provided with materials, study guides, specific activities and teacher's guidance, with the purpose of making them resourceful and actively engaged. Moreover, in this EAP context, the learner has to develop certain study skills (Jordan, 1997) which can be enhanced by the development of study competence skills. This more general study capacity, which includes cognitive and affective factors, such as self-confidence, self-awareness, the ability to think critically and creatively, and independence of mind (Waters & Waters, 2001), can help students perform different learning tasks efficiently and with confidence.

Drawing upon these views on learner autonomy and the use of the Internet, we observed how students interacted with the materials in the course and how they performed through course activities. The design of the study and the results of our analysis are presented in the following sections, together with a discussion about the autonomous behaviour learners were able to display.

## The Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze students' behaviour as autonomous learners and thus provide a more accurate picture of their profile. Taking as the starting point both the profile described and the categories identified in our previous study, we now seek to delve into students' behaviour as autonomous learners using a larger sample of subjects. In this study we have analyzed the specific actions students were able to undertake and have paid special attention to which of them are more common among students. In order to elicit this behaviour, we used a series of course activities which strongly encourage students to make decisions and take actions in order to manage their learning process.

In the following sections, we present detailed information about the participants in the study, the data gathered, and the results obtained. We then discuss these results in the light of the views and principles about autonomy, language and learning that underlie our study.

## Subjects

The subjects in this study were the students taking the course “English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web,” delivered through the Internet as part of the *Intercampus* programme. The students taking this course thus come from a variety of universities and degree courses, and in different editions, as shown in Table 1 below.

Academic years	Number of students
2000-01 (spring term)	29
2001-02 (fall term)	28
2002-03 (fall term)	22

Table 1. Number of students participating in the study.

The course is oriented towards English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and places special emphasis on the use of the Internet as a tool to encourage students to become autonomous learners of English. Therefore, course materials have been designed with this purpose in mind.

The students taking this course made up heterogeneous groups, with participants from different geographical locations, as well as with different levels of English and interests, although all of them have a minimal command of English that allows them to communicate in the language. The course is not oriented towards a particular level, but instead it aims at fostering students’ capacity for learning to learn. The course has been designed so that students themselves can choose the contents and tasks they want to do, thus allowing for a flexible learning route that each student can adapt to his / her learning style. Given the characteristics of the course, that it is part of a pilot program in Catalan universities, and that students have to take a virtual course in English outside their own university, a general profile can be drawn which indicates that students are highly motivated to learn English and to learn in an online mode.

## Data

The data for this study were collected from students’ work on course activities, which had been specially designed to promote learner autonomy through the use of Internet resources. In addition, throughout the course students also completed learning logs



(personal record sheets) to help them plan and keep track of their learning process. Both students' performance on course activities and the personal record they kept of their own progress were analyzed in this study in order to derive the profile of those students as autonomous learners. Although we cannot make generalizations from an exploratory study like this one, we think a picture can be obtained which can give us an overview of the trends that a certain population of students shows as autonomous learners. This close picture can give us useful information to help learners develop their autonomy and thus become more effective learners.

In keeping with the general philosophy underlying the course, activities were designed to help students reflect on the learning process by sharing ideas in virtual debates, for example; to encourage them to use resources, strategies, and techniques to manage their own learning; to make them create their own learning opportunities, by means of extensive exposure to real language and participation in authentic communication; as well as to help them make the most of Internet resources for language learning, particularly considering their academic needs.

Specifically, among the variety of materials in the course, the data for this study were gathered from the following tasks. Table 2 shows the list of tasks analysed and the code assigned to each:

Tasks analysed	Task code
Self-access learning plan	(SA)
Grammar safari	(GS)
Using communication resources to improve language skill	(CR)
Debates	(DB)
Exploring and evaluating resources for language learning	(ERL)
Personal Record Sheet	(PRS)

Table 2. Tasks analysed.

The aim of the “Self-Access Learning Plan” (SA) was to help students plan, organize, and evaluate their own route, with actions that involved analysing needs, choosing and evaluating materials, and assessing their performance, for example. The “Grammar Safari” (GS) is based on an activity found at (from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and aims at encouraging students to explore samples of authentic language use and investigate a grammar aspect they are particularly interested in. The next activity analyzed, “Using Communication Resources to Improve Language Skills”

(CR), encourages students to use Internet resources like forums, chats, bulletin boards, or MOOs (MUD, Object Oriented) to exchange information about language with other Internet users beyond the classroom. With “Debates” (DB), on the other hand, students were asked to read Internet material and participate in an online discussion with other course participants about different aspects of language, learning, online environments and general academic life (such as academic stress, gender and technical studies, managing time at university, etc.). The next activity analyzed, “Exploring and evaluating resources for language learning” (ERL), included a variety of Internet resources for language learning which students had to evaluate and choose from, according to their personal needs. As for the students’ log, the “Personal Record Sheet” (PRS), it consisted of an interactive chart in a Word form in which students were asked to plan and organize their work on each of the course modules. Specifically, for each module they had to establish learning objectives, decide which tasks they wanted to do, evaluate them and also assess their own performance. When completing each module, they had to reflect on what they had learnt and write it down on the PRS.

Given that this course was delivered on the Internet, communication between teacher and students, including their queries, activities and contributions to the weekly debates, took place through e-mail messages and electronic documents. This Internet communication, though in written form, combines features of orality and writing, thus allowing students to reflect on and plan their messages while at the same time enabling them to express their thoughts spontaneously. It was precisely from the documents and messages mentioned above that students’ references to autonomous behaviour were identified and coded for their analysis.

### **Analysis**

In this study, data were analysed mainly qualitatively, though in combination with quantitative methods. First, students’ messages, course work, and learning logs were analysed in search for specific actions, views and attitudes that could be related to learner autonomy. Students’ references to learner autonomy were coded independently by different researchers, who then contrasted their analyses. Some of the expressions could be assigned simultaneously to more than one category. The qualitative analysis also involved looking at the scope and contents of students’ references to autonomous behaviour. The analysis of these references was expected to yield a picture of students’ behaviour as autonomous learners. Specifically, the categories used in this study derived from the taxonomy obtained in a previous

exploratory study which involved the analysis of a smaller sample (Arnó et al., 2003). With the further analysis of a larger corpus of data, those categories were refined, which yielded a slightly modified taxonomy. As in the previous study, students' autonomous behaviour was analysed in terms of actions, on the one hand, and views and attitudes, on the other. These terms are defined as follows:

Actions refer not only to specific activities that students can be seen to undertake through course work, but also to the intentions that they explicitly express. In contrast, by views and attitudes, we refer both to students' opinions on or disposition towards language and learning as well as to their mental representations of different aspects of learning. (Arnó et al., 2003: 6)

Second, in addition to drawing a picture of our students as autonomous learners, the aim of this study was to look at what actions and views were more common in the groups analysed. For this reason, students' references to autonomous behaviour that had been coded were then quantified. Both the qualitative analysis of students' comments and the results of the quantitative data are discussed in the next section. Below is the taxonomy used in the present study, together with an explanation and an example of each category. At this point, it should be taken into account that, to a large extent, the categories that emerged during the analysis of the data were influenced by task design, since this study was carried out in the context of a course oriented towards the development of learner autonomy.

#### **A) ACTIONS:**

##### 1) Analysing needs and establishing objectives:

Students derive their learning objectives from their perceived difficulties and from the academic and professional situations in which they will use English. This relationship is made explicit in many cases.

Example: *"I need to listen or improve my comprehension and I find listening difficult"* (SA)

##### 2) Planning, organizing, and monitoring the learning process:

Students make decisions on the procedures they will follow in order to carry out their learning objectives.

Example: *"I have chosen this page because in the last days I have been using it in many cases. It's a reference web page where you can consult any word or phrase on-line"* (ERL)

3) Using and sharing resources, strategies, and techniques:

They apply different cognitive and metacognitive strategies, making comments on their own learning process. Students share resources with the rest of the class.

Example: *“Referring to the language learning strategies that I already use, I have an organised approach to my language learning and try to think about language in terms of the different categories, systems and patterns within it. Also, I use to plan my language. But, on the other hand, I don’t use to apply any of the strategies showed in the list”* (DB)

4) Evaluating progress and results:

Students have been strongly encouraged to evaluate their own progress throughout the course, particularly at the end.

Example: *“At least, I’ve got used to writing long texts without lots of problems”* (DB)

5) Evaluating learning materials / tasks:

Just like the evaluation of one’s own progress, evaluating materials is one of the actions that are encouraged during the course. Students’ evaluation of learning materials reflects their autonomous behaviour.

Example: *“Some sites are quite useful whereas some others are boring, but it’s good to check and compare them so you realised which are better to learn”* (PRS)

6) Assessing difficulty (task, language, materials):

In their evaluation of tasks or their own progress, students made reference to the difficulty of learning activities, materials or language data presented. We think it is also an important category in analyzing students’ development of their autonomy.

Example: *“Some of the listenings are quite difficult because of the vocabulary is quite specific. The best is that you can know your level”* (PRS)

7) Expressing intentions about future learning actions

Although this category may be difficult to distinguish from “Planning, organizing, and monitoring the learning process,” we refer to the learning opportunities students identify outside the course. This category is particularly relevant to our notion of autonomy because it entails the ability to learn English beyond the “virtual classroom.”

Example: *"I have discovered many different resources that we can use freely through the Internet at any time. Therefore, I can continue my learning process after this course"* (DB)

## **B) VIEWS AND ATTITUDES:**

### 1) General attitude towards language and learning

Students' work as autonomous learners sometimes reflects their feelings about language and learning.

Example: *"Also, after having done this course I think that I will feel more self-confident when I read academic texts"* (DB)

### 2) Expressing views and opinions on some language teaching practices

Sometimes students give their opinions on certain aspects of teaching and learning.

Example: *"It is important for students to learn the language in a natural way, and, if teachers tell them that the word "just" is used in a simple context (present perfect), then, when they are discovering the "real world," they will notice that what they have learnt is not true, because if they read an article and they find that they just can't understand the word in that context, they will feel sad"* (GS)

### 3) Expressing opinions about online learning

The dual nature of the use of the Internet in the course (the Internet is used both as a resource and as the medium through which the course is delivered) is clearly reflected on students' views. Accordingly, two categories can be identified in our analysis: this one (which includes students' opinions about distance learning) and the next one.

Example: *"The fact of not knowing who you are talking to also brings some advantages and disadvantages. If you can see people, there is more human contact, more feeling. With online learning, we can only see written words (unless you've got a camera to do video-conferences)"* (DB)

### 4) Expressing opinions on the potential of Internet-based resources for language learning

The second category related to the use of the Internet in the course comprises students' views about how it can be used as a tool for language learning, regardless of the medium through which the course is delivered.

Example: *“As there are lots of web pages that can be visited, I think the ways of learning a foreign language using the Internet are infinitely. We can find two types of sources in our learning: the sites especially designed to learn a language and the general sites that are written in that language”* (DB)

5) Describing the profile of the good language learner

Students have their own views and perceptions of what makes a good language learner. The profile they create is viewed as a model for their own learning.

Example: *“We have read and discussed about the learning process. Although it may seem useless, I believe that it is very important to be aware of the way you learn and how you can improve. Therefore, learning new tips about how to learn and becoming a more active learner can help us make the most of all the efforts we do to learn a language”* (DB)

## Results and Discussion

The quantification of all the references to learner autonomy made by students yielded a total of 268 actions and 100 views/attitudes, as can be seen in Figure 1. Among students’ expressions related to learner autonomy, there are far more actions than views or attitudes. This may be due to the nature of the tasks, which require students to perform specific actions (analysing needs and evaluating materials, for example), whereas views and attitudes are reflected through students’ specific comments (sometimes embedded within the actions themselves).

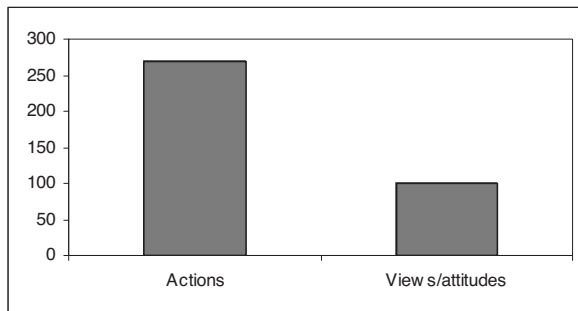


Figure 1. Total number of actions and views/attitudes identified in the data.

The distribution of specific actions, on the one hand, and views and attitudes, on the other, is shown in the figures below:

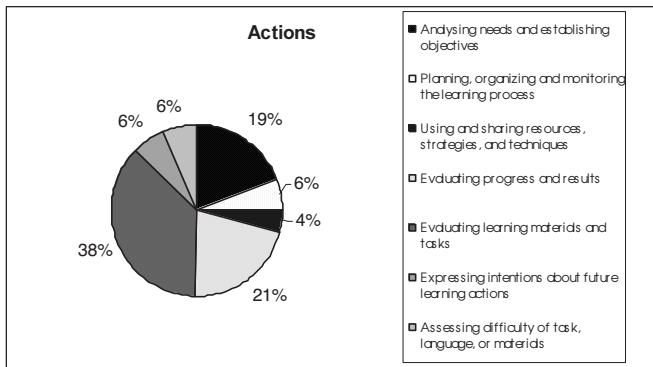


Figure 2. Actions undertaken by students in relation to learner autonomy.

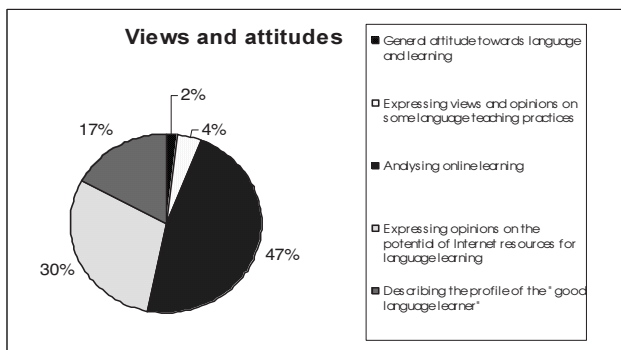


Figure 3. Views and attitudes that students express with regard to learner autonomy.

The actions students undertake appear to be largely affected by the design of the course tasks analysed, although the corpus for this study includes students' answers to a wide range of tasks intended to elicit many different actions and views related to learner autonomy. Figure 2 shows that the actions most commonly found among students include evaluating materials (38%), evaluating progress and results (21%), as well as analysing needs and establishing objectives (19%). The prominence of these actions may be due to students' familiarity with them or to the fact that these actions are more effectively elicited by the tasks than others.

On the other hand, the views and attitudes expressed by students, as reflected in Figure 3, seem to be mostly related to their opinions about online learning (47 %) as well as to the use of the Internet as a tool for language learning (30%). Due to the emphasis that the course itself places on distance learning and Internet resources for language learners, students get easily involved in this topic. At the same time, considering that nowadays online courses are widely offered everywhere, students seem to be particularly inclined to give their opinion about this mode of learning, especially if they have taken any online courses before and have therefore some experience in this mode of study.

The qualitative analysis of students' references to learner autonomy allowed us to obtain a clearer picture of the sophistication of their behaviour as autonomous learners. Below is the analysis of the scope and nature of the actions and views/attitudes manifested by the participants in this study.

### **Actions**

Among the actions undertaken by our students, many are related to “analysing their own needs and establishing objectives,” which will then constitute the basis for making decisions independently about their learning goals. Through the self-access learning plan and the personal record sheet, learners are invited to reflect on their weaknesses and to design learning routes according to their needs or their own curiosity about language. Their performance on these activities shows their capacity to make some decisions as to which language areas they wish to work on and why, so they are often capable of relating needs and objectives. In this sense, some learners seem to be more capable than others of establishing specific goals and learning routes as they are able to state their objectives accompanied by a highly detailed plan of the actions they will undertake to put them into practice, as shown in the extract below.

*“My plan will consist of periodic listening exercises, for instance, one or two movies a week (satellite TV) and or sporadically some programs or news. I will write down whatever I listen and then try to check it listening again giving special emphasis to the parts I haven't understood ...” (SA)*

Others, however, although perceiving a real need, express their objectives as a very broad or unfocused list of goals, as in “*I wish to learn about the basic skills in language learning: reading, listening, writing, and speaking*” (PRS). Sometimes, students can also identify more specific needs and objectives, which in some cases refer to academic



and professional situations: *“My work obliges me to be in contact (normally by phone) with people from other countries (above all England). So, it is obvious that my listening skills must be good in order to enable me to communicate with my English colleagues”* (SA).

As regards the actions related to “planning, organizing, and monitoring their learning process,” students make comments which derive, to a great extent, from the design of activities in the course, like the self-access learning plan. Such activities encourage students to undertake these actions. Specifically, students can be observed to choose learning materials and make decisions on how to use them, as shown in the following extract: *“I have chosen this page because in the last days I have been using it in many cases. It’s a reference web page where you can consult any word or phrase on-line”* (ERL). Students also make specific decisions on methodology, organize a schedule with a specific learning plan, and evaluate the effectiveness of the decisions they have made regarding the learning process. The following extract, which is part of a self-access learning plan, shows a highly detailed account of the actions a student will undertake in order to improve his writing skills, making use of Internet communication facilities.

*“A good starting point would be, for instance, subscribing to a business forum where apart from reading the messages of the other board members, you are supposed to collaborate and give your opinions. This would ease the process of starting to write periodically and with stress not only on the content but also on the form.”* (SA)

As for the action that we have labelled “using and sharing resources, strategies, and techniques,” throughout the course students rarely make explicit what specific resources or strategies they use. However, we found some instances of students sharing resources with their classmates, which is probably influenced by the fact that the course is delivered through the Internet, with students working alone but sharing common virtual spaces in the electronic classroom. Also in connection with the virtual nature of the course, there are instances of students relating their comments to other classmates’ (*“I agree with Sergi’s classification of language resources...”*) (DB) or helping each other out, given that they share common needs and problems. In the following contribution, a student advises one of his classmates on how to practice speaking skills, overcoming the natural limitations of an Internet-based course.

*“I read that you find it difficult to speak English and to practice your oral skills. I felt the same before but now I am glad to say that I could arrange this problem. I found two Erasmus students,*

*thanks to University Pompeu Fabra's language exchange program, and we try to speak in turns in German and French -depending on the person- and in Spanish. For the moment I haven't found an English speaker but I hope I will soon. If you are interested in speaking English with native people you can contact Voluntariat Lingüístic from UPF (I don't think they will have problems in having people from other Universities): voluntariat.linguistic@grup.upf.es or let me know and I will try to introduce you to some Erasmus students. I really think that is a good way to learn a foreign language as well as to make friends from all over the world! Of course if there are more people who are keen on this exchanging program you can also let me know.” (DB)*

Students' comments reveal that they have become familiar with fairly sophisticated metalanguage – introduced in the course materials – which students have been able to incorporate into their own contributions (e.g. approach, learning strategies, autonomous learning, patterns, etc.). When students explicitly manifest that they use certain strategies, they mention those they are already familiar with, usually related to their specific field of study. For example, the student below, who in addition to taking her degree in Documentation works as a librarian, decides to apply a strategy from her job.

*“I'm used to working with keywords and search engines, as a librarian, but I'd never used them to search for grammar use of words. I've found it very interesting and I'll do it more often.” (GS)*

The resources that students mention usually come from the course material and from those provided by other classmates. In the extract below, for example, a student specifically mentions the strategy of paying attention to other classmates' use of language. Again, this strategy is made possible by the use of computer-mediated communication in during the course. Through written messages sent to the electronic forums in the classrooms – both for group work and for whole class discussion – students can collaborate and contribute to the joint construction of discourse.

*“I'm benefiting a lot from this virtual course. I pay attention at all the expressions my “course mates” use and try to use them later in my essays. And it is also making me read a lot which helps me to start thinking in English before I get on the writing instead of being translating all the time.” (DB)*

Another action that students appear to perform quite frequently is “evaluating progress and results.” Similar to what happens with “analysing needs and establishing objectives,” this action is constantly elicited throughout the course, which may account for its frequency among students. In spite of this frequency, students do not often

make sophisticated evaluations. Such evaluations are often made through general unfocused comments that do not derive from a thorough analysis of their performance, but from a general perception. It is perhaps worth mentioning, nevertheless, that when commenting on achievement, some students refer to the development of their autonomy, acknowledging that they have become more resourceful (e.g. “*I don't know if I'm doing mistakes as at the beginning of the course, but now I know where to find and correct them,*” DB) and especially that they can use Internet resources (e.g. “*I have learnt to be auto-sufficient to learn English through the web,*” DB), thus pointing to the role of the Internet as a tool for the development of learner autonomy.

Constantly elicited throughout the course, “evaluating learning materials and tasks” is by far the most common action students undertake. Especially remarkable in this course is students' evaluation of learning websites. Through course activities, students are encouraged to develop a series of criteria on which to base their evaluations, which should help them choose and make the most of the learning materials they can find on a self-access mode (whether on the Internet or elsewhere). As with the category “evaluating progress and results,” students' comments regarding materials also tend to be too broad and unfocused, though course activities seem to enable them to make decisions on the choice and use of Internet learning materials for certain purposes. As the following extract shows, this student is able to provide a fairly detailed reasoning for the choice of a particular material.

*“If I had to choose one resource for English learning, I'd choose the first one because I think is the most complete one. You can learn different skills (writing, reading, speaking, ...) there are different kind of exercises, ... and you can communicate with other students and teachers, which I think is very important to practice. It is user-friendly, and it invites to follow with it, and it gives good tips to make profit of the resources it offers and to improve the language knowledge.”* (ERL)

Two actions that are not commonly found in students' comments, yet they are encouraged through course activities, correspond to “assessing difficulty of tasks, language or materials” and to “expressing intentions about future learning actions.” As for the former, they are usually manifested through unfocused comments, except when students refer to particular difficulties they have encountered in doing a certain task (i.e. they mention specific problems they faced when doing an activity). As for the latter, since one of the objectives of the course was to help students go on with the learning process once the term was over, we paid special attention to their

references to such intentions. Most students' comments referred to the vast amount of resources and materials presented during the course, which they expected to use, on their own, after the term (e.g. *"Now I have a lot of resources that I can use in the future to improve some critical points of my English and learn new ones without a teacher"* DB).

### Views and attitudes

As for the views and attitudes manifested by our students in different course activities, we have identified five general categories. Mostly derived from their comments in classroom debates, these categories reveal how our students have reflected on language and learning, some language teaching practices, the nature and advantages of online learning, the potential of Internet resources for language learning, and even the notion of what constitutes a good language learner.

The "general attitude towards language and learning" of our students shows that they are highly motivated and prone to language learning. Given the nature of the course, we believe that a student taking part in a language course like this one should be especially motivated not only to learn a foreign language, but to do so in a virtual environment using the Internet. Some of their comments emphasize the need to be open-minded towards language learning and the use of technology for learning. They also acknowledge the importance of being organized and of planning learning paths in order to make the most of a virtual course which requires a certain degree of autonomy. A few students' comments go beyond language learning itself and establish a relationship between language learning and culture, pointing out that learning a language does become the gateway to a new culture. The following extract summarizes these general views:

*"Of course, I agree with Isabel who said that learning a language is learning a culture too. We should forget our inhibitions and being open minded! Gemma thinks that being open minded as well as being motivated and organised can help a lot and I totally agree with her."* (CD)

Through their "views and opinions on some language teaching practices," our students show the capacity to manifest a critical attitude towards certain aspects of language and teaching. Some of them have expressed a critical view on the use of contrived situations versus real language in many language courses, emphasizing the benefits of being exposed to authentic language and real communicative situations that the Internet certainly provides. The following extract from a grammar safari activity illustrates this point.

*"It is important for students to learn the language in a natural way, and, if teachers tell them that the word 'just' is used in a simple context (present perfect), then, when they are discovering the "real world," they will notice that what they have learnt is not true, because if they read an article and they find that they just can't understand the word in that context, they will feel sad." (GS)*

The use of the Internet, both as the medium through which the course is delivered and as a resource, is also manifested through students' views and attitudes. Specifically, this dual use of the Internet is reflected in two of the categories we have identified: "expressing opinions about online learning" and "expressing opinions on the potential of Internet-based resources for language learning." In the former, when students analyse distance learning, apart from expressing general views, they also provide some specific reflections. Through course activities, students have analysed the characteristics of online learning, pointing out some of the advantages that using the Internet offers for language learning. For example, some of the students feel that they can express their opinions more freely and openly in a written form, rather than in a classroom-based situation. Other remarkable advantages they perceive are that online learning allows them to manage their time and to interact with other learners and native speakers. The following extract reflects these views.

*"In my opinion, the advantages of the web for languages learning are that you can express your opinion with others learners and interact native people, you can access online tutorial, know the country where is spoken this language, you can read newspapers from around the world or you can have a translation aid to learn vocabulary and expressions." (DB)*

Students also seem to be aware of the new roles of teachers and learners in a distance mode, often referring to the teacher as parent in a classroom-based situation versus the teacher as facilitator in distance learning. As for learners, a common conclusion some students come to is that an online language course is not meant for beginners but for mature and "experienced" students who can display a certain degree of autonomy. Moreover, through their views and attitudes, they often compare classroom-based courses (which they call "traditional") and online courses. Sometimes they express their views using metaphors, for example when comparing online learning to an "adventure" or the role of the "traditional teacher" to that of the teacher in a virtual course.

As regards "expressing opinions on the potential of Internet-based resources for language learning," in general, learners acknowledge the potential of resources such

as chats and forums devoted to language learning, because they can have access to real-time communication and can solve language problems on their own (e.g. “*I think that Internet communication resources can be perfectly useful to solve language problems*” CR). Therefore, students’ comments reveal that they are able to establish a purposeful relationship between the Internet and autonomous learning. Although most students evaluate Internet resources positively, they still point out that the great amount of these resources may indeed overwhelm them. We believe that this view underlines the difficulties they may have in “choosing the right page,” which hints at the need for developing skills that can enable them to manage and find the necessary resources, thus making them more effective autonomous learners.

Finally, the category labelled “describing the profile of the good language learner” corresponds to our students’ own perception of what makes a good language learner. Similarly to what happened in some of the actions formerly analysed, and as a result of course materials, most students have incorporated into their own definition of the good language learner an elaborate metalanguage to present their views. Their comments on this aspect reveal that a good language learner should be highly motivated, have both “linguistic curiosity” and a cultural interest, and be self-disciplined and constant in his or her efforts to learn. This extract points out some of their perceptions of the good language learner:

*“A good language learner has to be constant and follow his/ her plan and monitor his / her progress to realize if his/ her techniques are good or not and be open-minded to try whenever he/ she can his/ her new language.”* (DB)

Some of our students’ opinions clearly show an alert attitude towards language use in order to improve their own production, which is reflected in their readiness to notice “new words or expressions we hear” and their interest in “asking native speakers and trying to use them” (DB). Another interesting aspect that our students have commented on is the relationship between learner awareness and autonomous learning, since “being aware of the way you learn” (DB) and reflecting on the learning process certainly allows students to take on an active role as to which strategies should be applied to manage their own learning. When commenting on what constitutes a good language learner, most students have emphasized the need to be “organized.” The capacity to analyse needs, set objectives, work on a regular basis, and identify weaknesses forms part of the definition they usually attribute to

being “organized,” which includes their ability to perform actions and take decisions about learning strategies and learning management. When referring to “learner autonomy,” most students match this concept with “independence” and with the fact of having “to learn by oneself,” but they also imply a certain interest in learning. Particularly relevant, however, in their own definition of learner autonomy, is that they associate the good language learner with a certain degree of autonomy on the part of the student, who should try to make the most of every possible opportunity to learn and practise the language, as this extract indicates:

*“A good language learner has always to be a little autonomous, that is, he has to find everywhere the opportunity to learn something new or to practice what he had learned.” (DB)*

## Conclusions and Implications

In a course largely devoted to the development of learner autonomy, students seem to use the resources provided and show a certain degree of autonomy. At the same time, they have to get used to the new roles and norms of participation of the virtual classroom. Contrary to students' previous experience as language learners, in this particular course, it is not only the teacher who makes the decisions concerning materials or methodology, nor is she the main provider of information. In this sense, and using the Internet both as a vast repository of materials and as the medium for communication, in this course we seek to achieve more symmetrical roles and relationships, where information can be accessed by all class participants, whether teacher or students, who freely select the ideas they want to present and discuss with others. We think that having a virtual classroom, with shared communication spaces where anyone can initiate topics or reply to anyone else's contributions, also helps to break down the hierarchical barriers usually found in a traditional classroom and favours a higher degree of student-student interaction. In addition, the written nature of electronic communication, the emphasis on the process rather than on the final product, and the tasks and materials that encourage reflection also allow us, as teachers, to access valuable information which helps us get to know our students' profiles. By tracing their actions and views, we have attempted to draw a profile of our students as autonomous learners, trying to find out what they do to manage their learning process and what they think about language and learning.

This article is another step of a more ambitious attempt to draw a thorough profile of a group of learners who, throughout a term, try to progressively take on more responsibility for their learning and wish to go on with their learning process once the course is over. We are aware that we still need to carry out more detailed observations of what our students do and that having more information will help us draw a better picture. As teachers carrying out this research, our ultimate aim is to be in a better position to help them develop their autonomy, by encouraging autonomous behaviours and supporting the strategies that students find effective. Any more information we can gather from our virtual classroom will be extremely valuable to move towards that aim.

From the results presented in this article, we can observe that students carry out a wide range of actions and present different views and attitudes on language and learning, with a genuine interest in and a curiosity about language learning and the Internet. In fact, the prominent role of the Internet in this course seems to foster their intrinsic motivation. Also largely derived from the electronic medium in which this course takes place, its rationale and the supporting atmosphere that class participants (both teachers and students) try to create, students seem to take greater risks and deploy highly sophisticated strategies, which allow them to successfully perform different actions in a creative manner. These actions are then reflected in the development of purposeful activities intended to help them improve their own learning as well as that of other students. For example, we can see that students are able to develop their own learning plans, to evaluate materials critically, to give advice to other students, to investigate about language, and even to collaborate to design learning tasks for other students to complete.

On the other hand, and despite the presence of a wide range of strategies, we still find that students need to be “pushed” to show more autonomous behaviour, and sometimes we just find that when asked to perform certain actions related to the management of their learning, some students simply give broad unfocused statements that turn out to be of little use to carry out further actions or devise new plans. In other cases, students merely try to provide an answer to the task, hoping to respond to the teacher’s expectations, by rephrasing the information provided in the materials and resources. These situations point to the need for a greater involvement on the part of the learners, who should see their work in this course as developing purposeful tools that should be useful to them, rather than simply complying with teacher requirements. We



believe that these limitations we have observed can be greatly overcome with a more generalised attitude of student responsibility as well as with a greater effort on our part in task design and student monitoring. Considering these results, our research agenda for this ongoing project will need to include materials design for learner autonomy and teacher participation, with the pivotal role of the Internet in the dual position mentioned above. All in all, we consider that both the course and the inquiry that we have done into it have been enriching experiences for us, language teachers that wanted to know more about our learners. While trying to overcome these limitations, we also think that it can be beneficial for both teachers and learners to incorporate part of the ideas and behaviours discussed here into other, more conventional, EAP courses that we teach.

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