

## *Learning diaries to Foster learner autonomy in mixed-ability groups*

### *Los diarios de aprendizaje como herramientas para facilitar la autonomía en grupos de diferente capacidad*

**Andrés Canga Alonso**

Universidad de La Rioja

Recibido el 28 de julio de 2010  
Aprobado el 5 de octubre de 2010

**Abstract:** This paper describes the role of learning diaries to promote self-reflection and learner autonomy in EFL with mixed-ability 4<sup>th</sup> ESO students. It will start with a description of origins and development of e-mail tandem, its relationship with the theories on learner autonomy, and the use of learning diaries as a way to promote students' self-reflection to foster learner autonomy. The second part refers to the research carried out with mixed-ability 4<sup>th</sup> ESO students at a Secondary school in Oviedo (Asturias) focusing on the main characteristics of the students involved in the study, and the tasks developed.

**Key words:** Learning diaries. Autonomy and self-reflection.

**Resumen:** Este artículo describe el uso del diario en el aprendizaje del inglés en alumnos de 4º de ESO de diferente capacidad con objetivo de fomentar la reflexión sobre el propio aprendizaje y la autonomía de los aprendices. Comienza con una descripción del origen y desarrollo del e-mail tándem, su relación con las teorías sobre el desarrollo del aprendizaje autónomo y el uso del diario para favorecer la reflexión y facilitar el desarrollo de la autonomía de los aprendices. La segunda parte se centra en el estudio realizado con alumnos de diferente capacidad de 4º de ESO de un centro concertado de Oviedo (Asturias), aludiendo a las características del alumnado participante y a las tareas realizadas en el aula.

**Palabras clave:** Diarios de aprendizaje. Autonomía y reflexión.

# 1.- E-mail tandem and learner autonomy.

The concept of learner autonomy in foreign language learning has been thoroughly discussed during recent decades. In the early 1980's HOLEC defined autonomy as a complex process by which learners progressively *take charge of their own learning* (1981: 3), so that they assume responsibility for their learning process by taking active part in all the decisions concerning their second/foreign language acquisition. Some authors (see WOLF, 1982; BRAMMERTS and LITTLE, 1996; GLÄSMANN & CALVERT, 2001) began to develop an approach to foreign language learning called *face-to-face tandem*. At the beginning, it was aimed at undergraduate students taking part in intensive courses, and the main concern was to help students with different mother tongues work together using different tasks, so that they could improve their linguistic competence in the foreign language, get to know their partner better, and benefit from their partner's knowledge and experience (BRAMMERTS, 2003: 28-29).

This way of learning a new language is based on two main principles: reciprocity and autonomy. Reciprocity means that *each partner brings certain skills and abilities which the other partner seeks to acquire and in which both partners support each other in their learning in such a way that both benefit as much as possible from their working together* (2003: 29). Autonomy implies that both partners are responsible for their own learning, so they decide "*what they want to learn, how and when, and what sort of help they need from their partner*" (2003: 29).

These two principles are closely related to the views some scholars have on autonomy in foreign language learning (see BENSON, 1996; LITTLE, 1991; NUNAN, 1992), as they understand it as mutual collaboration among students with a view to improving their linguistic competence in the target language. These authors believe and claim that learning is achieved when there is a strong relationship between the structures learned by the students and their use in connected speech.

On the other hand, tandem language learning has a lot to do with *collaborative language learning*. This type of learning takes place when two people share the idea of improving their communicative competence in the target language, and establish a *negotiation* to reach an agreement on how they will deal with the tasks they have to face together.

Thanks to this approach, students belonging to different societies and countries establish an intercultural communication with their partners (STICKLER & LEWIS, 2003: 97-98). This idea of intercultural communication is quite remarkable and it was promoted within the *Common European Framework*, which understands foreign

language learning as an active process in which learners should not only acquire the grammatical and phonological features of an L2, but should also be aware of the way people live and behave within the target language community. This approach to the target language community is supposed to lead to what has been called *intercultural communicative competence* (see BYRAM, 1997).

In the 1990's, with the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), e-mail tandem began to spread (see ALVAREZ *et al.*, 1996). It is based on the same principles as face-to-face tandem (autonomy and reciprocity) and e-mail becomes the means by which partners get in touch and exchange views and information. By means of their partners' e-mails, students come closer to the language and culture of the target language community and this fact could help them become aware of the similarities and differences between the native and the target language, so they could become reflective learners and, thus, more autonomous students.

This approach to foreign language learning is based on an asynchronous communication as *the writing and the receipt of messages are separated in time* (BRAMMERTS & CALVERT, 2003: 49). This asynchronous communication helps students analyse the content of the message they receive and they can make any comments they consider relevant to the tandem partner.

Besides, e-mail tandem is a key benefit for students who use it because thanks to it, they can establish a close relationship with students of their same age who, at the same time, belong to the target language community and they can talk about topics they both consider interesting. This communicative context tends to increase students' motivation in the foreign language as they become aware of the fact that they are capable of using the target language to communicate with native speakers. They have more freedom to deal with topics of their interest, so they become more self-confident and autonomous learners and they try to progress in their learning process. What is more, GLÄSMANN & CALVERT (2003: 6), after having analysed the work of students belonging to different countries, found that learners tend to respond quite positively to ICT due to the novelty of writing e-mails. It means a change from traditional lessons, making the students feel both more active and more motivated by foreign language learning.

If we go back to the reciprocity principle, e-mail tandem helps equality between both tandem partners because they must help each other in order to achieve the learning goals they have previously set. To achieve these goals, tandem partners should use both their native language and the target language in each message and the ideal situation is when they write half of the message in each language. Using both languages also implies that the method has a lot to do with *learning from the partner's model*, which has five further implications. Firstly, *learning from a partner's clarifications, explanations and information* (BRAMMERTS & CALVERT, 2003: 52). Learning is also achieved by *dialogue*. The dialogue will benefit from the fact that both learners are interested in the

language and culture of their partners, have previous knowledge of it and can learn from comparisons.

Secondly, *learning forms of utterance and behaviour from a partner which involves [...] productive [language] use by learners* (2003: 52). This process has a lot in common with intercultural learning because there is not only the need to be grammatically and phonologically competent in the L2, but there is also the need to know the context and the cultural connotations that may be implied in the words that are uttered or written. The third implication when learning from the partner is *learning from the partner's corrections*, as partners *must state clearly what should be corrected in what way and at what time, and if necessary, give hints to their partner* (2003: 53).

*Learning from the partner's model* also entails self-reflection and mutual collaboration between tandem partners. On the one hand, self-reflection implies reflection upon their own native language, mainly when learners have to answer their partner's questions or doubts, and upon the target language, whenever they have to use it as a means of communication. These two aspects are closely linked to autonomy and autonomous language learning as learners need to reflect on their learning process as a previous step to becoming autonomous language learners (Little 45). In order to promote this reflection on the learning process, OTTO suggested the introduction of learning diaries since *A specific tandem diary could contain the ideas and comments of both learners concerning then reciprocity principle and the way they work together* (2003: 89). Furthermore, learning diaries are important introspective tools which help learners *gain confidence, make sense of difficult material, and generate original insights* (NUNAN, 1992: 120), and they are also excellent sources for self-assessment since they are *excellent sources for the exploration of affective, social and cognitive variables* (OXFORD et al., 1996: 21).

Finally, participants on a tandem exchange should be able to understand simple utterances from their partners and be able to produce texts in writing with the help of support materials. In addition, they should employ useful learning strategies and techniques to avoid possible breakdowns in communication (BRAMMERTS & CALVERT, 2003: 54).

However, as the student's work analysed will show, most learners, especially teenagers, are not ready to perform all these activities on their own and they need some extra help. This need is closely related to the concept of autonomy in language learning and the new role we, as teachers, have in the foreign language classroom. The teacher is no more the only source of knowledge but a *facilitator of language learning and its transmission* (VOLLER, 1997: 100) and a *counsellor to whom learners turn for consultation and guidance* (1997: 103). When students have difficulties in their learning progress they will come to their teachers for advice and counselling. Teachers do not have all the power in the classroom situation (*teacher-centred classroom*) but they progressively transfer it to their pupils through collaboration and negotiation (*learner-centred classroom*).

To conclude with the first section of this article, it could be maintained that e-mail tandem is closely linked to VYGOTSKY's (1978) constructivism and it is also related to FREIRE's critical theory (1974), which emphasizes the importance of a critical view of language learning against its social and cultural background in order to help students achieve productive learning through deep reflection.

## **2.- Methodology.**

### **2.1.- Participants.**

The participants involved in the study were 92 students from 4th year of obligatory education at a secondary school in Oviedo (Northern Spain). Fifteen of these students belonged to what in the Spanish educational system is called *Diversificación Curricular*. The students in these groups have specific learning difficulties and/or suffer lack of motivation towards formal learning, in this case towards foreign language learning. They may also have behavioural or psychological problems. The rest of the informants were also in their last year of obligatory education and did not have any specific learning or behavioural problems.

The research was carried out during two academic years (2003-2004 and 2004-2005) and the participants were divided into four groups according to the school year during which they took part in the study, and their learning capacities. Thus, students who participated during the school year 2003-2004 were included in group 1 if they belonged to the learning difficulties group and in group 2 if they belonged to the ordinary school classroom, while students with learning problems from the school year 2004-2005 made up group 3. Group 4 was formed by students without learning difficulties analysed during the same period of time.

### **2.2.- Instruments.**

The study was based on action research (LATORRE, 2003: 23), as the researcher tries to improve his teaching practice following a spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection, and applied to a particular teaching context trying to show if students with different learning abilities can become more autonomous in their learning thanks to e-mail tandem and the use of learning diaries. Besides, the researcher observed the students' performance leaving the participants the chance to work independently, collaborating with their Spanish peers and their English tandem partners, only taking active part whenever students found a difficulty and asked for help.

All the participants were involved in an e-mail tandem exchange, which, as it was mentioned in the first section of this paper, is based on two main principles: reciprocity and autonomy. Reciprocity here is used to mean that *each partner brings certain*

*skills and abilities which the other partner seeks to acquire and in which both partners support each other in their learning in such a way that both benefit as much as possible from their working together* (BRAMMERTS, 2003: 29). Autonomy implies that *both partners are responsible for their own learning, so they decide what they want to learn, how and when, and what sort of help they need from their partner* (2003: 29). In order to find a partner school the Tandem Server at the Ruhr-Universität in Bochum (Germany) (tandem@slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de) was contacted, and the school was paired with a private boarding school located in West Sussex (UK). Once a week students wrote or answered to the partners e-mails in the IT room. The topics were related to personal interests or cultural aspects such as festivals in England and Spain or schooling in both countries.

Students with learning difficulties (groups 1 and 3) were asked to write a learning diary (see OTTO, 2003; NUNAN, 1992; OXFORD *et al.*, 1996; BRAMMERTS, KLEPPIN and CALVERT, 2003) about their tandem learning experience. In their diaries students should keep a copy of the e-mails sent by the tandem partner as well as their reflections on them regarding unknown vocabulary, comments and corrections made by the partner on the e-mail they have previously sent, and any other comments students considered relevant for their learning. Diaries could be written in Spanish or English and students were given some time to write their entries at the end of each session in the IT room. At the beginning of the school year, students were given examples of previous work on tandem paying close attention on how to correct partners' mistakes, and to reflect on their learning process. At the end of each term, the students showed their diaries to the teacher, discussing the main difficulties they have found while writing them. No extra mark was given for this work. At the same time, students with learning difficulties (groups 1 and 3) filled in a learning agreement (*Convenio de Autoaprendizaje*) at the beginning of both academic years where, on the one hand they were informed about the topics they would be working with their tandem partners and, on the other hand, they were asked to choose what they would like to learn from each of the topics, giving reasons for their choice as well as the tools they would be using in order to attain their goals (e.g. asking tandems partners for specific information or clarification whenever they did not understand any extracts from their e-mails). The aim of this learning agreement was to make them feel responsible for their learning, which is why they had to sign it at the end.

During the school year 2004-2005 forty-one out of sixty-three students without learning difficulties were asked to reflect on their learning by means of a diary. However, fifteen of them refused to do it as it was not a compulsory task in order to pass the subject. In order to establish a comparison with the rest of the members of this group and those students from group 2 (i.e. students without learning difficulties who were analysed in the school year 2003-2004 and did not write a diary), all the participants had to fill an evaluation sheet at the end of each school year where, on the one hand, they had to give their personal view on the e-mail link, and an evaluation of their tandem experience by giving a mark from 1 to 5, justifying the reason for that

choice. In addition, they answered questions about the topics discussed during the year and also about the cultural aspects involved in the e-mail tandem partnership.

Huttunen's scale was used to measure the degree of autonomy students have attained thanks to the combination of e-mail tandem, learning diaries, and evaluation sheets. She distinguishes three different types of activities: (1) determining individual and group objectives, (2) monitoring procedures about the choice of skills, performance of work, participation, homework and presentation of results, and (3) evaluation of their own learning process (HUTTUNEN, 1993: 34) and three levels of autonomy associated with each of them. Table 1 summarizes the way learners should perform an activity in order to attain any of these three levels of autonomy.

Table 1 (HUTTUNEN, 1993: 34).

ACTIVITY	LEVEL OF AUTONOMY		
	1	2	3
1. Determining objectives a) personal objectives b) group objectives	Objectives, timetable, choice from alternatives	+ Procedures  Clues or materials	Larger context  No guidance
2. Monitoring procedures a) choice of skills b) performance of work c) participation d) homework e) presentation of results	Choice from list or selection  No supervision  Limited No control  When asked	Own material (restricted)  + concentrated  active + extra information spontaneous (short)	Own material (ample, diverse)  + effective (helping others)  constructive holistic learning of topic spontaneous (extensive)
3. Evaluation a) evaluation of process b) checking of performance c) grading	When asked  Key  Key (test)	Spontaneous  Criteria  Criteria (test)	Attitude: evaluation an integral part of studies  + analysis  grade of course and analysis of reasons

According to the characteristics of the students involved in the study and the abovementioned instruments, our analysis focuses on performance of work,

participation in all the activities developed during the research, evaluation of process and grading by means of the evaluation sheet.

### 3. Results.

Thirty-seven diaries were collected during the study, six of which (three from groups 1 and 3 and three from group 4) will be analysed in this section. These six diaries are examples of the three main tendencies the students showed according to two main criteria: on the one hand, degree of self-reflection on the e-mail sent by the tandem partner i.e. how students use that e-mail in their learning process (e.g.: if they simply comment on mistakes made by the English counterpart and write down lists of unknown vocabulary or, contrariwise they also reflect on the possible advantages of the text for their learning process). On the other hand, the analysis will focus on the language students have used to do the reflection i.e. Spanish or English. Diaries are shown as they were written by the students, so they contain several mistakes which were not corrected by the researcher to keep their originality. As mentioned in section 2.2., diaries should include the e-mails sent by the tandem partner together with their reflections about it in their diary entries and they could correct their partners' mistakes either in the e-mail or just below it. E-mails are included in boxes, and students' reflections appear below in italics. Bold type is used to show how students corrected mistakes in the texts sent by their partners.

Finally, to preserve the identity of the students whose diaries will be analysed in this section, informants were given a number, 1-15 for those belonging to groups 1, and 3 and sixteen onwards for groups 2 and 4, preceded by a letter –s (student) in order to avoid misunderstanding between group and student numbers.

#### 3.1.- Diaries from students with learning difficulties.

S7 only keeps three e-mails in his diary and he simply comments the mistakes made by his tandem partner, writing down unknown vocabulary and omitting its translation into Spanish. On the other hand, there is no reflection on the messages he has received as shown in the following example:

Hola X

Que tal? Me llamo X y soy estudiante de Y.

Me gusta salir a Brighton a los fines de semanas. Brighton es el pueblo cerca de mi colegio. juego muchas deportes, por ejemplo el futbol y el tenis.

Mi casa es cerca de Londres, y me encanta ir a Londres a noche.

Este Verano, fui a espana con mi familia. Fuimos a la costa del Sol. Pasé una buena tiempo. Hizo calor y sol. Comí Paella y bebí mucho vino blanco.

El verano proximo, me gustaría ir a Francia porque me gustaría practicar la lengua.

Que hiciste durante el verano?

Estudio Ingles, Espanol, Business, y biologia. Me gustaría estudiar Ingles a universidad cuando yo soy mayor.

Me gusta escuchar la musica, que típico de musica tu gusta?

Where about do you live? What music do you like to listen to? Do you like sports, what type of sports do you like to play? Do you have any brothers or sisters. Where is your school?

Escribe me pronto

X

*Tiene fallos de expresión y persona.*

*Vocabulario: Ninguna*

The following extract is taken from s2's diary. His work is interesting as he is one of the few students who points out the lack of corrections on the part of his e-mail partner. At the same time, he corrects his partner's mistakes, writes down unknown vocabulary and reflects on the message he receives, as shown in the example below:

Hola X!

¿Qué tal?

Como estan los otros?

Yo estoy muy bien y mis vacaciones ~~eran~~ **fueron** fenomenal. Fui a Bulgaria y jugaba al furbol. Como ~~eran~~ **fueron** tus vacaciones? Pasate tus vacaciones en Oviedo, o no?

Estabas con los otros?

Ahora no tenemos mucho tiempo libre en el colegio porque estamos estudiando por los exámenes. X y yo jugamos al futbol todos los días y **al** baloncesto con X. X dejó ~~at~~ **el colegio** y va **a** estudiar en un colegio de arte.

X te dice hola y X tambien.

Are you coming to Lancing next year, all of us want to go back Oviedo.

We miss everyone from Oviedo and we hope to see you soon.

Besos

X

*Me dice que tiene muchas ganas de volver a Oriedo y me pregunta si yo tengo ganas de volver a Lancing.*

*No tiene muchos fallos, lo único malo que tiene son algunos verbos, preposiciones...*

*Yo lo entiendo todo menos miss everyone.*

*No me comenta ningún fallo que yo tenga.*

To finish with this section, s25 is the informant with learning difficulties who has acquired a higher degree of reflection on the e-mails received, as she is able to translate the text into Spanish and write a short comment about it in English, as shown in the following extract from her diary:

In the summer holidays, I always go back to Hong Kong. I go shopping, watch films, and play football with my friends. Sometimes I go on vacation to other countries like Korea, Japan, Thailand or some places like that.

Voy a ir a Hong Kong. Voy a visitar mi familia y mis amigos. Voy a jugar al fútbol.

Voy a comprar al zapatillas.

*En las vacaciones de verano, siempre voy a Hong Kong. Voy de compras, veo películas y juego al fútbol con mis amigos. A veces en vacaciones voy a otros países como Corea, Japón, Tailandia, etc.*

*He is explain me what he is doing in summer holidays. Always he goes to his country but to another countries too. They have the custom to go holidays to a lot of countries.*

### 3.2.- Diaries from students without learning difficulties.

S33, as shown in the extract below, underlines the unknown words which she puts into Spanish, and the mistakes made by her partner below the received e-mail, but she does not make any other comments or reflections, apart from translating some of the words into Spanish:

¡Hola X!

I have been asked to tell you about Halloween and Guy Fawkes' Night. Well, to tell the truth it's all rather boring really! Halloween is on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and younger people generally dress up as ugly things like ghouls or ghosts and go round other people's houses to do 'Trick or Treat' [...]

Las vacaciones pasados fui a España. Mis padres y yo viajamos a Barcelona y nos quedamos en las estribaciones de los Alpes en un pueblo que se llama La Seu d'Urgell. Nos quedamos en un hotel para siete días y era muy hemoso. Todos los días montábamos a caballo con mi padre e íbamos en lo alto de las montañas.

Anyway I have to go now, so bye!

X

*Rather-bastante*  
*Ugly- feo, horroroso*

*Ghouls*  
*Go round*

S63 attains a higher degree of reflection as she is able to analyse and comment on the emails. At the beginning she uses her mother tongue, but as the study develops she refers to her partner's message in English. These are her comments on the first e-mail:

*Se le da bien el español pero tiene dificultades con la concordancia de femenino y a veces confunde el español con el francés ya que utiliza la preposición "de" y el posesivo "me".*

*En esta carta me dio a conocer cómo es él y deduje que es un chico bastante ordenado ya que separa el inglés y el español con un doble espacio.*

And that is what she wrote in her diary to reflect on the last e-mail:

*With this letter I can know how he spend his holidays and the places that he visit. He has got some mistakes with the verbs and sometimes he writes in French.*

Finally, s60 corrects her partner's mistakes and reflects on the e-mail using the target language from the beginning of the study, as shown in the following example:

Hola X,  
Que tal? Que tal las vacaciones de Semana Santa?  
Mis vacaciones eran fenomenal porque estaba en Bulgaria con mis amigos y mi familia.  
Cuando estaba en Bulgaria, había una partida de futbol entre los equipos de Bulgaria y Suecia y yo fue en el estadio para verla. Este fue una experiencia muy buena.  
We just came back from the holidays and already have a lot of work to do. This is my final term here in Lancing and I will try to enjoy it maximum. My exams are coming very soon and I need to start doing my revision. Tell me about how are your lessons going?  
Besos X

*Eran- estuvieron, fueron*  
*Una partida- un partido*  
*Fue en el- fui al*  
*Verla- verlo*  
*Este- esta*

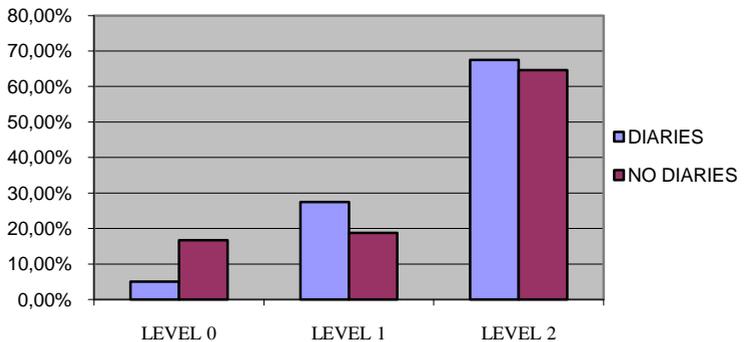
*In this letter she has more mistakes but it's good written anyway because the mistakes aren't important. Here, she talks about her Easter holidays in Bulgaria. She also tells me that this is her last year in Lancing and she wants to enjoy it a lot. She has to study very hard too.*

#### 4. Discussion.

If we compare the degree of autonomy attained by students with and without learning difficulties who registered their e-mail tandem exchange by means of learning diaries, it is noticeable that all the participants in the research, no matter their learning abilities, reached level 2 on Huttunen's scale (see table 1 section 2.2.) as far as participation is concerned, as they have been actively involved in their learning process. However, the situation varies a great deal when analysing students' performance of work, as 60% of the informants who belong to groups 1 and 3 attain level 2 because in spite of needing support from the teacher they show a high level of implication in the tasks done during the research i.e. e-mail writing, reflecting on learning diaries and filling in the evaluation sheet. The percentage rises to 96.15% in the case of the students belonging to group 4. Furthermore, there is one student from group 4 who attains level 3, which is the highest in Huttunen's scale, as she does not need any help from the instructor and also helps other students who have difficulties in performing the task when she finishes her own work. On the other hand, the rest of the students with learning difficulties (40%) are in level 1, since they do not need any revision from the teacher, but their degree of performance of work is much lower since they do not make any comments on their diaries and they do not pay any attention to their answers on the evaluation sheet. It is also remarkable that the members of group 4 attain higher levels of reflection when evaluating the e-mail tandem experience by means of the evaluation sheet, since 84.62% are able to reason their answers as opposed to 33.33% of the students with learning difficulties.

Comparing these findings with the ones achieved by the students who did not register their learning in a diary, it can be pointed out that 67.5% of those who registered their learning in a diary disregarding their learning abilities, when asked to give a mark from 1 to 5 to their tandem work in the evaluation sheet, are able to justify the mark given to the e-mail tandem, so they progress to level 2 on Huttunen's scale, 27.5% are able to grade it but provide no reason to support their answers, so they attain level 1, whereas only 5% of them provide no answer which implies that they had been unable to attain any of the levels suggested by Huttunen. As regards learners who did not register their learning progress on a diary (groups 2 and 4), either, as mentioned in section 2.2., because they had refused to do it or they had not been asked to, there is a slight decrease in their responses to this same question. Thus, 64.58% are able to support their arguments, so there are not remarkable differences between the students who used a diary in their learning process regardless of their learning capacities and those who did not keep a diary about the e-mail tandem work. 18.76% of the

informants belonging to these same groups (2 & 4), who have attained level 1 regarding participation and performance of work, grade the work in tandem giving no reasoning to support their views, and the rest of the participants (16.66%) give no answer to it or do it incoherently, being higher the number of the learners belonging to group 4 who did not answer. Figure 1 summarizes the degree of autonomy attained by the participants as far as the evaluation of the process is concerned, taking into account if they have used learning diaries, and regardless of their learning difficulties: Despite Huttunen's scale—going from level 1 to level 3, level 0 is included to refer to those students who have not answered the question referring to evaluation or have done it incoherently.



*Figure 1. Self-Evaluation of the process*

These results indicate that there is some relationship between autonomy and the use of learning diaries when it comes to promoting students' evaluation of their learning process, no matter their degree of learning capacities, since despite there not being outstanding differences among learners who have attained level 2, it is remarkable that the number of informants who achieved level 1 is higher in the groups of students who have used learning diaries (27.5%) as opposed to 18.76%, and what is more, only 5% of those who have registered their learning in a diary are unable to evaluate the work in tandem as opposed to 16,66% of those who have not utilize them. A similar behaviour was noticed when the students were asked in the evaluation sheet with regard to their feeling of being more autonomous than they were at the beginning of the study, because 80.56% of the students who made use of learning diaries answered positively as opposed to 54.17% for those who did not utilize this tool in their learning.

## 5. Conclusion.

The findings of this study show that most of the students involved in the research attained a certain degree of autonomy in their learning, regardless of their learning capacities. There is also a clear indication that the use of learning diaries helped our students to be more reflective. The use of this learning tool seemed to be helpful to them when it came to giving reasons in support of their views when they had to evaluate their partner's work and their e-mail tandem experience. Students who wrote learning diaries performed better in the evaluation of the process and they also feel more autonomous than those who did not use them and it seems that the diaries allowed students with learning difficulties to reflect on their learning process.

Finally, there is need for further research to be carried out following the guidelines pointed out in the *Common European Framework* and the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP), so that students' diaries and e-mails would be part of their *Dossiers* and these documents will be used to reflect on their learning by using the descriptors from the *Language Biography* regarding writing and reading skills in the foreign language, to analyse, on the one hand, what level from the six established in the *Common European Framework* (A1-C2) can each of the groups of students (i.e. learning difficulties and students without learning problems) attain, and on the other hand, if learning diaries helped them be more autonomous and reflective when compared to students who do not use them as part of their formal instruction.

## 6. Works cited.

- Álvarez, Juan Antonio; Blanco, Margarita; Ojanguren, Ana; Brammerts, Helmut; Little, David. *Guía para el aprendizaje de lenguas en tándem a través de Internet*. Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Oviedo, Oviedo, 1996.
- Benson, Phil. "Concepts of Autonomy in Language Learning", *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*, R. Pemberton, E. S. Li, W. R., Or and H. D. Pierson (Eds.). Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1996, pp. 27-34.
- Benson, Phil. *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Longman, London, 2001.
- Brammerts, Helmut. "Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem: The Development of a Concept", *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*, T. Lewis and L. Walker (Eds). Academy Electronic Publications, Sheffield, 2003, p. 27-36.
- Brammerts, Helmut; Calvert, Mike. "Learning by Communicating in Tandem", *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*, T. Lewis and L. Walker (Eds.). Academy Electronic Publications, Sheffield, 2003, pp. 45-59.
- Brammerts, Helmut; Calvert, Mike; Kleppin, Karin. "Aims and Approaches in Individual Learner Counselling", *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem* T. Lewis and L. Walker (Eds.). Academy Electronic Publications, Sheffield, 2003, pp. 105-114.
- Brammerts, Helmut; Little, David (Eds.). *Leitfaden für das Sprachenlernen im Tandem über das Internet* (Manuskripte zur Sprachlehrforschung. 52). Brockmeyer, Bochum, 1996. 13 May 2010 <<http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/learning/tanbib.html>>.
- Byram, Michael S. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1997.
- Freire, Paulo. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Sheed and Ward, Londres, 1974.
- Gläsmann, Sabine; Calvert, Mike. *Tandem Language Learning in Schools*. Philip Armstrong Publications, Sheffield, 2001.
- Holec, Henri. *Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning*. Pergamon, Oxford, 1981.
- Huttunen, Irma. "Towards Learner Autonomy in a School Context", *Autonomy and Self-Directed Language Learning: Present Fields of Application. Autonomie et Apprentissage autodirigé: terrains d'application actuels*, H. Holec (Ed.). Council of Europe Press, Germany, 1993, pp. 31-40.
- Latorre, Antonio. *La investigación-acción. Conocer y cambiar la práctica educativa*. Graó, Barcelona, 2003.
- Little, David. *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Authentik, Dublin, 1991.
- Little, David. "Developing Learner Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Social-Interactive View of Learning and Some Pedagogical Principles", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 38, 1999, pp. 77-88.
- Nunan, David. *Research Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1992.

Otto, Eric. "Language Learning Strategies in Tandem: How to Learn Efficiently", *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*, T. Lewis and L. Walker (Eds.). Academy Electronic Publications, Sheffield, 2003, pp. 79-91.

Oxford, Rebecca Louise; Lavien, Roberta Z.; Felkins, Gregory; Holloway, Mary Emily; Saleh, Amany. "Telling their Stories: Language Students Use Diaries and Recollections", *Language Learning Strategies around the World: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, University of Hawaii Press Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, Oxford Honolulu, 1996, pp. 19-34.

Stickler, Ursula; Lewis, Tim. "Tandem Learning and Intercultural Competence", T. Lewis and L. Walker (Eds.). Academy Electronic Publications, Sheffield, 2003, pp. 93-104.

Voller, Peter. "Does the Teacher have a Role in Autonomous Language Learning?", *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*, P. Benson and P. Voller (Eds.). Longman, London, 1997, pp. 98-113.

Vygotsky, Lev. *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1978.

Wolff, Jürgen. "TANDEMadrid - du hilfst mir lernen, ich helfe dir lernen, und so verstehen wir uns besser", *Hispanorama*, 32, 1982, pp. 13-18.

