

The Language Portfolio as a Self-Assessment Mechanism in an English Course Aimed at Fostering Senior Students' Autonomy

Uso del portafolio como mecanismo de auto-evaluación en un curso de inglés tendiente a fomentar la autonomía en adultos mayores

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This article describes an action research project in which the members of a basic English class for adults over 50 at a Colombian public university undertook the mission of discovering their potentialities as autonomous learners. By means of the reflective use of the language portfolio, the members of this course guided the planning and execution stages of the course they were enrolled in. The findings show that learners' reflection may be convenient when designing a course that better fits the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the students so that they can profit more from the course itself.

Key words: Autonomy, language portfolio, reflection, senior students

Este artículo describe los resultados obtenidos mediante un proceso de investigación acción en el cual los participantes en un curso de inglés para adultos de más de 50 años en una universidad pública de Colombia asumieron el reto de descubrir su potencial para aprender una lengua extranjera de manera autónoma. Gracias a la reflexión en torno al proceso de aprendizaje, promovida por el portafolio de lengua, los participantes guiaron la planificación y ejecución del curso del cual eran parte. Los resultados muestran que la reflexión puede servir a los estudiantes como un mecanismo que les permite tomar control de su propio proceso de aprendizaje del inglés de tal forma que puedan beneficiarse más del mismo.

Palabras clave: autonomía y portafolio de lengua, reflexión

Introduction:

Opening the Comparison with a Case of Psychoanalysis

A young woman comes to the office of a renowned psychoanalyst. On describing the reasons that have taken her to such place, she complains about a problem with her language (French); although she has taken countless courses on the appropriate use of [the] language, she is not yet able to articulate the meanings that she wants to convey. For her, expressing her truth by means of language seems to be an unattainable goal, which appears to be frustrating and desolating. Thus, she expects the psychoanalyst to give to her the element that she needs to completely master [the] language, that element that many language teachers in the past have not been able to provide her with. But, such element will not come to her as a prescription issued by the psychoanalyst; instead, the specialist will take her through the process of discovering the desired element all by herself. According to the psychoanalyst, the patient is the possessor of the yearned-for truth and she will discover it, with some guidance from the expert, while she reflects on her problem on the divan. (Bataille, 1985, pp. 7-30)

Similarly, as the psychoanalyst is required to provide a definite cure for the problem that the young patient faces, sometimes English teachers may tackle analogous situations in which learners expect to be transformed into proficient users of the target language without having to make any effort. But in practical life, this is quite unlikely to happen; as it will be claimed afterwards in this paper, proficiency can only be achieved when learners accept the idea that their own efforts are vital to progress in learning. As Scharle and Szabó (2000) colloquially stated: “You can bring the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink” (p. 4).

This paper will describe the most relevant aspects –theoretical and methodological– that encompassed the realization of a small scale action research project in which the members of a basic English class for seniors at Universidad Nacional undertook the mission of discovering their potentialities as autonomous learners; potentialities that had probably been inhibited by previous experiences in educational settings.

By means of the reflective use of the language portfolio, the members of this course informed the planning and execution stages of the course they were enrolled in. Throughout this article, learners’ reflection, as an exercise of their autonomy, will

be presented as being convenient when designing a course that better fits the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the students so that they can profit more from the course itself.

Complementarily, it should be stated that the ultimate goal of the research project described herein was the empowerment of learners. As it is going to be surmised here, autonomy is a possible way to empower learners to be successful language learners and users.

Statement of the Problem

Departing from the reflection on an experience teaching English to adults over 40 in which adult students appeared to be passive and almost disinterested in language learning, we originated this study on the hypothesis that adult learners who exhibit these behaviours are completely capable of being responsible for their learning process, although some circumstances may be affecting their exercise of responsibility and autonomy. Possibly, among some other factors, adults who adopt these behaviours do so due to “over-reliance on the teacher” as a phenomenon learned in and promoted by previous educational contexts.

In order to explore the validity of the above presented hypothesis, during the first stage (diagnosis stage) of this study, the 15 participants of an elementary English course for senior adults at the “Programa de Atención Integral al Adulto Mayor Pensionado y/o Beneficiario de UNISALUD” underwent a process to unveil their possible beliefs and attitudes towards English that could represent an obstacle for them to be actively involved in their learning process.

The application of a questionnaire related to students' previous learning experiences revealed that probably some factors of past learning situations had inhibited the potential of students for taking care of their learning processes. In this case, during the second stage of the study, the issue was to find out what the appropriate means to foster students' responsible attitudes could be.

In doing so, the language portfolio was seen as an excellent means to sort the problem out. At a first glance, the portfolio seemed to be promising on account of its reported potentialities when trying to foster students' critical reflection and free choice during all the stages of curriculum design and execution. Hence this study aimed to prove whether or not the language portfolio had the power to

foster the manifestation of autonomous and responsible behaviours and attitudes among the students of the course that was basis for this research project.

Theoretical Framework

Autonomy

Definitions of the concept of autonomy are myriad. Herein, only the definitions that have been proposed by the major outstanding figures in the study of autonomy and its implementation will be presented.

First of all, it would be convenient to have a look at one of the first definitions of autonomy coined within the field of language teaching. In this regard, Holec's definition cannot be missed. For him, autonomy is as follows:

...the ability to take charge of one's own learning and to take control of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec, 1988, p. 3)

Although this definition was one of the first to be conceived, it has the advantage of presenting autonomy as an observable construct; it includes the levels of the learning process at which an autonomous learner normally exercises his/her potential to make decisions and takes responsibility for his/her learning.

Little (1991) also proposed a well-known definition of autonomy. He argues that autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized and he expands on that argument by saying the following:

Essentially, autonomy is a capacity –for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity of autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learnt to wider contexts. (p. 4)

This time, autonomy appears to have a close relationship with decision making. But this author enriches his definition by giving a special place within autonomy to reflection and the psychological linkage that the learner develops towards the content and the process of his learning.

After presenting these anticipatory conceptions of autonomy, it is precise to explore the definition that will receive a special heed in this study; it corresponds to Benson's definition of autonomy. He defines it as follows:

“The capacity to take control of one's own learning as one that establishes a space in which differences of emphasis can co-exist”. Complementarily, he goes further saying that “...an adequate description of autonomy in language learning should at least recognize the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content”. (Benson, 2001, p. 50)

The three levels of control mentioned in this definition will be described in the next title, but it must be said that although control over learning management and control over content are treated as different aspects, they actually constitute just one component of control, where control over content is subordinated to the control over learning management (Benson, 2001). But Benson presents them separately because, for him, control over content has an outstanding place within control over learning management.

Control over Learning Management

For Benson (2001) this aspect of control refers to “...the behaviours that learners employ in order to manage the planning, organization, and evaluation of their learning”. Also, he adds that “it is at the level of learning management that control over learning is most directly observable” (p. 76). Therefore, this aspect will be central when trying to conclude if the participants of this investigation achieved a better command of autonomy by means of the use of the language portfolio.

The identification of behaviours related to control over learning management has received a valuable contribution from the field of learning strategies research. Learning strategies could be defined as “learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner” (Cohen, 1998, as cited by Benson, 2001, p. 80). Besides, “since the conscious use of learning strategies implies control over learning management, taxonomies of

strategies may be a logical place from which to begin a description of the behaviours involved in autonomous learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 80).

Authors such as O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) have elaborated classifications of learning strategies. Although Oxford’s taxonomy is more extended than the one provided by the other two authors, they both coincide about including cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies in their classifications.

Regarding the case of control over learning management, cognitive strategies do not appear to be closely related to this kind of control as far as such strategies are operations effectuated on the language and not on the learning process itself (Benson, 2001). The remaining strategies assist learning through “focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means” (Oxford, 1990, p. 151). Thus, the latter strategies will be the point of reference to describe the attributes of control over learning management.

Taking into account metacognitive strategies, they describe mental operations used by the learners in the self-management of learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to the taxonomy provided by O’Malley and Chamot as cited by Benson (2001, p. 82), they can be classified as follow:

- Planning: ...proposing strategies for handling an upcoming task; generating a plan for the parts, sequence, main ideas, or language functions to be used in handling a task.
- Directed attention: ...maintaining attention during task execution.
- Selective attention: ...attending to specific aspects of language input during task execution.
- Self-management: ...understanding the conditions that help one successfully accomplish language tasks and arranging for the presence of those conditions.
- Self-monitoring: checking, verifying, or correcting one’s comprehension or performance in the course of a language task.
- Problem identification: explicitly identifying the central point needing resolution in a task or identifying an aspect of the task that hinders its successful completion.
- Self-evaluation: ...checking one’s language repertoire, strategy use, or ability to perform the task at hand.

It should be made clear that when using the term “task” in the previous quotation, it can refer to simple and small actions, like doing drilling exercises in the classroom, or it can refer to a more demanding action like the process of learning the language itself (Benson, 2001).

Moving into the scope of social and affective strategies, we learn they can be defined as the actions undertaken by the student to manage aspects of the learning situation that relate to other students –or the group as a whole- and to the self (Oxford, 1990). According to Benson (2001, p. 83), “social and affective strategies are also related to the learners attitudes towards language as an object of learning”. Regarding the subdivision that takes place within social and affective strategies, Oxford (1990, p. 21) mentions the secondary strategies shown in figures 1 and 2.

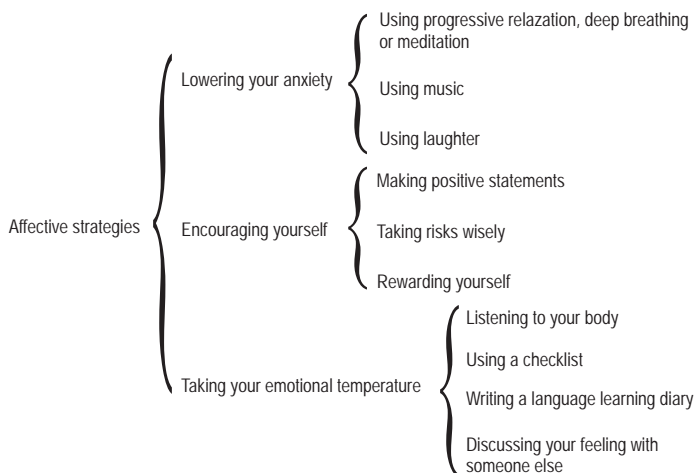


Figure 1. Affective Strategies

These social and affective strategies, together with the metacognitive strategies, stand as the behaviours that encompass the control over learning management. To the extent that the participants of this study reflected these behaviours or learning strategies through the use of the language portfolio, it shall be inferred to what extent this mechanism allows them to exercise their autonomous potential.



Figure 2. Social Strategies

Finally, before closing this section, some attention must be given to the control over learning content within the broader domain of control over learning management. But where does the importance of this aspect stem from?

Simply, as stated by Benson (2001, p. 99), “if learners are self-managing methodological aspects of the learning process but not learning what they want to learn, their learning may not be authentically self-directed”. Several authors support the importance of having learners select the contents of learning inasmuch as doing this allows learners to make their voice be heard. For instance, Kenny (1993, p. 440) claims the following:

“Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners, through processes deliberately set up for the purpose, to begin to express who they are, what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves”.

From the opinion of this author, it can be inferred that the recognition and affirmation of the identity of the learner within the learning process play an important role for exercising autonomy in language learning. This idea is supported by other authors, for example, Pennycook (1997), who argues that autonomy implies assisting learners so that they can acquire a “voice” in the foreign language that represents their cultural and ideological points of view.

Drawing a conclusion about control over learning content, we can state that this specific domain of control constitutes the way by which learners express their voice in learning; therefore, such domain of control acquires relevance as far as the expression of the “self”; the recognition of the learner’s identity constitutes a mandatory precondition for the existence of autonomy.

Control over Cognitive Processes: The Outstanding Place of Reflection

This aspect of control over learning has been included in this theoretical framework inasmuch as one of its component aspects appears to be of central importance to justify the use of the language portfolio in the process of helping students realize their capacities for autonomy.

Control over cognitive processes refers to the control of the psychological or mental operations that lie behind the performance of the behaviours mentioned in the previous section (Benson, 2001). This aspect of control cannot be directly observable but inferred from the behaviours that learners adopt. Within the cognitive processes that this aspect of control embraces, we can mention attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge (Benson, 2001).

From these cognitive processes, reflection is the one that offers a more convenient connection with the present study. According to Loudén (as cited by Benson, 2001, p. 91), this term can be defined as “a mental process which takes place out of the stream of action, looking forward or (usually) back to actions that have taken place”.

Complementarily, reflection could refer to an intellectual and affective activity by means of which individuals can analyze their experiences and achieve a new understanding of them (Boud, Keough & Walker, 1985).

The most important aspect of reflection corresponds to the claims made about its power to help learners become autonomous. It is said that “conscious reflection on the learning process is a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning” (Little, 1991). Furthermore, “reflection leading to action can be understood as the cognitive basis for control over learning management, especially if it is carried out collectively for the purpose of change” (Benson, 2001, p. 92).

As will be presented in the next section, the language portfolio offers a wide range of opportunities for learners to reflect both on language and on the learning process. For this reason, the portfolio was chosen to aid the process of autonomy development of this research inasmuch as reflection is the way by which learners can become conscious of the factors that favor or constrain progress in language learning (Candy, 1991).

The Language Portfolio

In this study, the language portfolio definition that was adopted corresponds to the concept of the portfolio promoted by the Council of Europe (2010). According to this institution,

It is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences.

This brief definition includes a very important aspect that connects the language portfolio with the development of autonomy. This definition positions the portfolio as a mechanism for learners to “reflect” on their language learning and, as was exposed in the preceding section, reflection is involved in helping the learner reach the control of the aspects of learning management.

In the same line of thought, Little and Simpson (2003) expand on the ways in which the language portfolio promotes autonomy. For them, the pedagogical function of the language portfolio can be developed and exploited by doing the following:

- progressively transferring responsibility for learning from the teacher to the pupils/students and encouraging them to reflect on their learning and to share this experience with other learners;
- systematically raising the learners’ awareness of the learning/teaching processes in which they are participating;
- engaging learners as participants in experimentation with different methodological options;
- getting learners to recognise their own cognitive style and to develop their own learning strategies accordingly. (p. 29)

Now, considering the component parts of the language portfolio as defined by the Council of Europe (2010), we have to mention the following:

... a *language passport* that summarizes the owner's linguistic and cultural identity; a *language biography* in which the owner captures his or her experience of learning and using second/foreign languages and encountering other cultures; and a *dossier* that contains evidence of the owner's language and intercultural proficiency (Little, 2002, p. 1).

The Passport section provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time; "the overview is defined in terms of skills and the common reference levels in the Common European Framework; it allows for self-assessment, teacher assessment and assessment by educational institutions and examinations boards..." (Council of Europe, 2010)

"The Language Biography facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress; it encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts..." (Council of Europe, 2010)

Finally, in the dossier learners have "the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport" (Council of Europe, 2010). Towards the end of this document, some of the "works" stored by the participants of the study will be presented just to elicit a link between the perceived gains in language proficiency and the eventual changes towards autonomous behaviours.

Methodological Framework: Following Action Research

As defined by Wallace (1998, p.1), action research is "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some area of professional practice". Benson (2001) considers that it is the most accessible form of research for teachers because its goal is the solution of problems encountered in everyday practice. Furthermore, "action research is also particularly suited to the field of autonomy because it is, in effect, a form of autonomous learning which can help us develop our own autonomy as teachers" (Benson, 2001, p. 182).

The general purpose of action research, no matter what specific kind of action research, is to “be a double-sided process of research, self research and education directed at individual empowerment and collective empowerment and/or emancipation (Boog, 2003, p. 427). Hence, this characteristic makes it suitable for the particular purpose of this study: helping learners assume control of their learning process in order for them to benefit the most from their initiative to learn.

Now, considering the specific processes that are developed within action research, we have to say that this method consists of three stages: diagnosis stage, in which the problem is identified; planning stage, which corresponds to the selection of strategies and procedures orientated towards changing the problematic situation; and finally, the implementation stage, where the strategies are put into use and the results of such application are registered and analyzed (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998).

During the diagnosis stage of this study, the “Questionnaire to survey past experience” was applied in order to inquire if implementing actions towards the fostering of autonomy was pertinent. In other words, this questionnaire was applied to find out if the problem that inspired the study really existed and, if so, to know what the dimensions of the problem were.

In the planning stage, the information gathered by means of the instruments used in the first phase served to design a syllabus for the course in which language issues selected by students were included as well as activities to foster the development of strategies and behaviors proper of autonomy. The contents included in the syllabus were not only suggested by students but were also based on contents included in the Global Scale and the Self-assessment checklist of the language portfolio.

Having the contents selected by learners was one of the first proofs that students may become responsible for their learning if they are given the chance to do so. To this effect, the Global Scale and the Self-assessment checklist served a vital function inasmuch as they turned into a point of reference for students to select the contents that they considered suitable for their needs and priorities.

Finally, in the implementation stage, learners used the language portfolio to record their work and also to reflect upon their learning process by means of the language diaries they wrote. The language diary, as the product of students’ reflection, was the instrument that provided the evidence that was analysed during this last stage.

The Participants

When referring to the participants that made up part of this study, it is necessary to talk about both the people that composed the studied course and the “program” that is the entity that offers this kind of English courses for senior people at Universidad Nacional. Taking into account this consideration, they both will be briefly described below.

On the one hand, the “Programa para la Atención del Adulto Mayor Pensionado y/o Beneficiario de Unisalud” was created to strengthen the functioning of the health care system of Universidad Nacional, which is called UNISALUD. By means of the benefits the program offers its affiliates, they can afford to have optimal mental and emotional health. Nowadays, the Program offers courses in four areas: language, technology, arts and culture, and healthy habits for health care. In the area of language, four courses are included: “Tertulias”, institutional memories, English, and French.

On the other hand, the population that participated in this study corresponded to the fifteen members of an elementary English course offered by the previously described program. The course was called “Sensibilización al idioma inglés” because it was oriented towards two purposes: providing its members with a first approach to the use of the language for basic communicative functions, and raising awareness among students about the aspects that can constrain or enrich the process of learning a foreign language. The fifteen members of the group were composed of five men and ten women. Their ages ranged between 48 and 74 years old. Before retiring, they occupied diverse positions in areas like administration (seven people), services (five persons), teaching (two people), and health care (one individual).

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire to Survey Past Experiences

The “Questionnaire to survey past experience” (see Annex 1) was proposed by Scharle and Szabó (2000, p. 17-20) as a mechanism to gather information about students' background. Although the original version of the questionnaire is in English, a translation of it into Spanish (Lucero, 1994) was used in this study as the participants of this research had very little or no prior knowledge of English when the course started.

The questionnaire was made up of twelve questions. The first ten questions aimed at discovering where the locus of control in students' previous learning experiences lay- on the learner or on the teacher. The two last questions of the questionnaire intended to gather information about the opinion of students on the positive and negative aspects of their previous experiences learning English. As will be presented in a later section, the data provided by this instrument really helped establish a point of departure to analyse and give a solution to the studied problem.

The Language Portfolio

The model of the language portfolio used in this study was inspired by the standard version of the portfolio issued by the Council of Europe (2010). This version, as any other, includes three sections: the language passport, the language biography and the dossier.

Results

Questionnaire to Survey Past Experiences

In total, ten students (eight women and two men) answered the survey. The information they consigned in this instrument can be divided into two groups: the first includes the answers reported in the first ten questions; the second corresponds to the answers provided in the last two questions.

The information gathered by means of the first set of questions can be classified into two differentiated trends. The first trend features the answers to the majority of the questions (namely 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10). Such trend relates to factors of previous learning experiences that appear to inhibit or constrain student's autonomy; more specifically, the teacher-centeredness of previous educational experiences. The second trend in which data was classified encompasses the answers provided by students to questions 3 and 7. This trend relates to forms in which students could relatively exercise autonomy in former educational settings.

In order to illustrate the first aforementioned trend, the answers to some of the questions contained in this first group are presented below.

The students' answers to question number 1: “¿El profesor de su curso de lengua anterior siempre le explicaba cada detalle?”, were:

1. ¿El profesor de su curso de lengua anterior siempre le explicaba cada detalle?

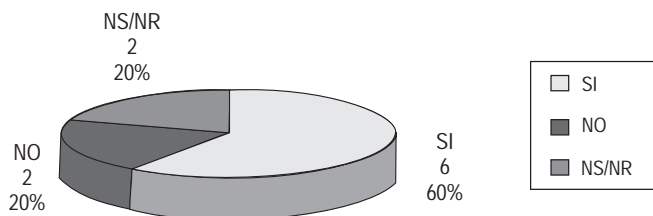


Figure 3. Sample question

As can be appreciated, for more than half of the individuals inquired of, their previous language teachers were always procuring all the necessary efforts to assure their pupils' understanding of the instructional contents. In a lower range, just a fifth of the tested population affirmed that in their previous learning experiences the comprehension of contents was not teacher-centered.

Complementing the answers to the previous question, answers to the second item of the questionnaire exhibit the patterns shown in figure 4.

2. ¿Usted tenía que adivinar por usted mismo cuáles eran las reglas/los significados?

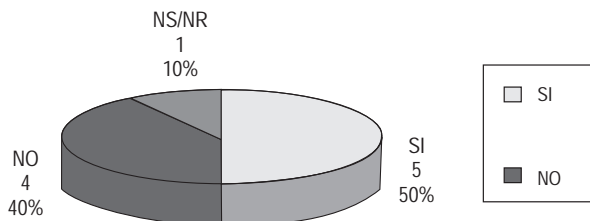


Figure 4. Sample question

Revealing a similar trend of poor attention given the role of the learner, the answers provided by students to questions 4 and 9 exhibit the patterns shown in figures 5 and 6. In this case, the results show that students’ point of view could hardly direct the course of the learning processes they had undertaken before.

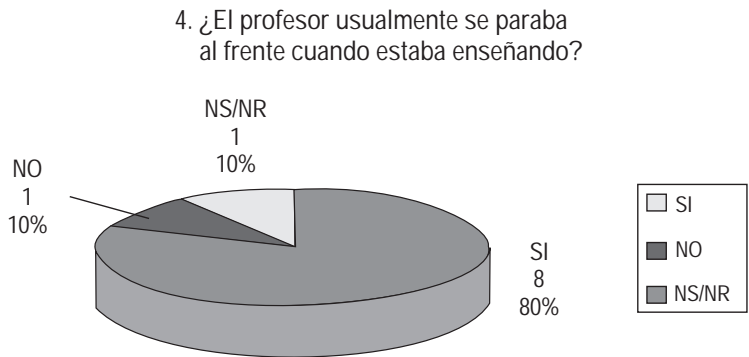


Figure 5. Sample question

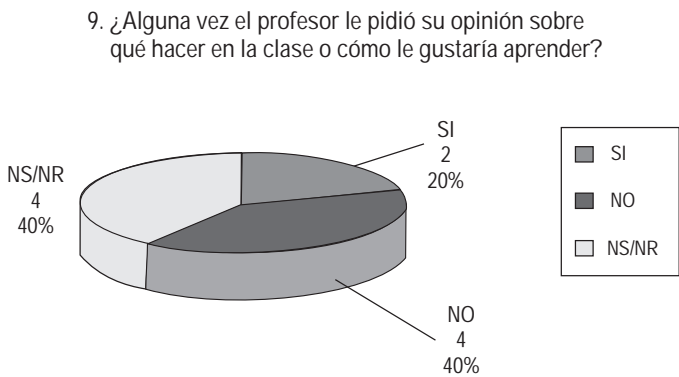


Figure 6. Sample question

Considering the two questions (namely 3 and 7) in which students’ answers indicate that autonomy was not constrained –or at least not much- in previous educational experiences, figures 7 and 8 depict the tendency of the results provided by these two questions.

3. ¿Alguna vez el profesor anterior le pidió trabajar en parejas o en grupos?

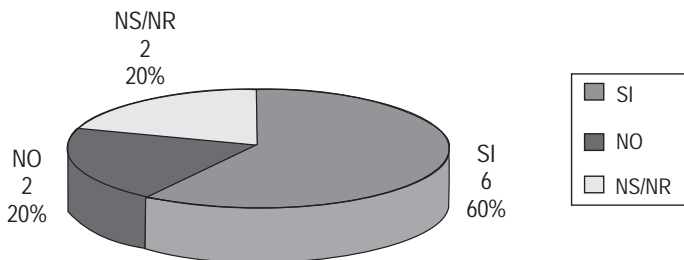


Figure 7. Sample question

7. ¿Recibió un trabajo adicional o una mala nota por no haber hecho la tarea?

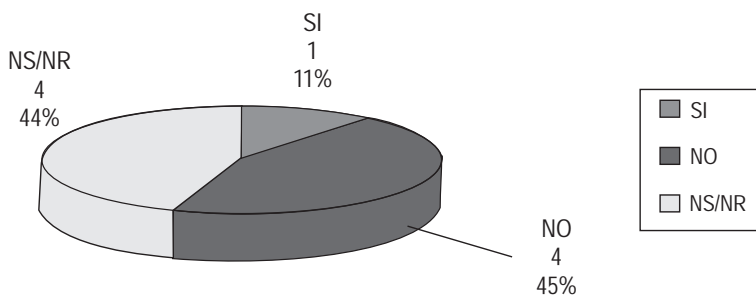


Figure 8. Sample question

From the information consigned in figure 7, it can be seen that at least the opportunities to interact with others, to negotiate meanings and to collaboratively decide on the appropriate ways to perform tasks and activities were not drastically inhibited by the previous educational settings.

Regarding the information contained in figure 8, it can be interpreted as a positive fact that not many of the students had experienced the imposition of

extreme measures to get them to work and be responsible for language assignments.

Taking into account the answers that students provided for the last two questions of the instrument, we feel the information obtained is not highly representative. The majority of the students avoided answering these two questions. In question 11 just two people answered and they admitted that the most positive aspect of previous learning experiences had been the “devotion of the teacher” to the course. In reference to question 12, two individuals answered it stating that the most negative aspect in preceding experiences learning English had been “the method” and one of them expanded on his answer by saying that what he did not like about the method was that it was “a distancia”.

The Language Portfolio

When describing the planning stage of this research, we said that the use of the Global Scale of the Language Passport and the Self-assessment Checklist had informed and assisted the participants as they selected the contents to be worked on during the course. At first sight, this fact shows that learners are capable and have the inclination to indicate the direction of the learning process if they are given the chance to do so. Therefore, the language passport and the language biography appear to have had a determining influence on the manifestation of this behavior proper of autonomy.

So far nothing has been mentioned about the information that was found by means of the participants’ learning diaries that were enclosed in the language biography. In this regard, the opinions of the participants were grouped into categories according to the kind of topic reflected on in each one of them. The categories, the theoretical foundations they relate to, and concrete examples of the categories are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Categorization of students' opinions

Category	Theoretical aspect connected to the category	Examples from students' diaries
Identification of learning difficulties	<p>“Problem identification: explicitly identifying the central point needing resolution in a task or identifying an aspect of the task that hinders its successful completion”. (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 138)</p>	<p>“To me is difficult write and pronounce because I don't know much English” (Beatriz);</p> <p>“Se me dificulta la pronunciación y la escritura, pero estoy poniendo mucho de mí para mejorar”.</p> <p><i>“Pronunciation and writing are difficult for me but I am doing my best to improve”</i> (Carmen).</p>
Positive concept of the other members of the group and disposition towards team work	<p>Social strategies: cooperating with peers and with proficient users of the language (Oxford, 1990, p. 21)</p>	<p>“De los compañeros destaco su actitud de colaboración con los que menos sabemos encontrando un ambiente agradable”</p> <p><i>“I stress the attitude of service my peers have towards those of us who know less. This makes for a nice environment”</i> (Hortensia);</p> <p>“me parece que se deben hacer en todas las clases esos ejercicios y el trabajo con otra persona fue súper porque nos ayudamos”</p> <p><i>“I think we should do those kinds of exercises every lesson; also working with another person was superb because we helped each other out”</i> (Carmen, second reflection).</p>
Confidence to express doubts and ask for clarification	<p>Social strategies: asking for clarification or correction; (Oxford, 1990, p. 21)</p>	<p>“Me siento motivada a continuar asistiendo a las clases, siento la confianza de preguntar cuando no entiendo y noto que he avanzado por todo lo anterior”</p> <p><i>“I feel motivated to continue attending classes; I feel confident asking for help when I do not understand and because of this I see I have made progress”.</i> (Hortensia)</p>

1 Samples are presented here as written by the participants. The ones written in Spanish were translated for the purpose of this publication.

Category	Theoretical aspect connected to the category	Examples from students' diaries ¹
Reaffirmation of the self	<p>“Autonomy implies assisting learners so that they can acquire a voice in the foreign language that represents their cultural and ideological points of view (Pennycook, 1997).</p>	<p>“Yo, adulto mayor Gabriel integrante primiparo del grupo de inglés básico durante el semestre primero del año 2010, pensionado de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, afiliado a UNISALUD... quisiera aprender dentro de lo posible muchas cosas: informática e inglés”</p> <p><i>“I, Gabriel, elderly man and freshman in the Basic English group of the first semester of 2010, retired from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, affiliated with UNISALUD... would like to learn, as far as possible, lots of things: computers and English”</i> (Gabriel, first reflection)</p> <p>“I want to learn English to defend me traveling to not being ridiculous” (Beatriz)</p>
Suggestion of materials that could assist the personal learning process	<p>“Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners... to begin to express... what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves” (Kenny, 1993, p. 440)</p>	<p>“Me gustaría [saber] cómo buscar por internet para ayudarme”</p> <p><i>“I would like to know how to use the Internet for assistance”</i> (Luz Marina);</p> <p>“me gustaría que nos escribiera la pronunciación”</p> <p><i>“I would like for the pronunciation to be written”</i> (Carmen, second reflection)</p>

All in all, the reflections of students contained in the language biography of their language portfolio let us see that behaviors recognized by the theory as belonging to autonomous learners were also shown by students in relation to the learning process.

Concluding Remarks

Summarizing the tendencies shown by the results obtained through the questionnaire, three aspects can be claimed with a reasonable belief in their certainty:

- In the first place, it is possible to see a tendency towards teacher-centered preceding educational experiences where the voice and the role of learners could hardly appear as the locus of control of the learning process.

- In the second place, it can be said that the scarce presence of language input and language activities and materials constituted a constraint on students' development of autonomy inasmuch as they were not given enough resources and opportunities to apply their capacities for control over learning management.
- Finally, it can be said that previous educational settings, at least, had not greatly affected the learners' capacities for cooperating with peers to take control of aspects of the learning process and had not imposed extreme measures such as punishment to ensure learners' cooperation.

Considering that the use of the Global Scale of the Language Passport and the Self-assessment Checklist informed and assisted the participants when they selected the contents to be worked on during the course, this fact shows that learners are capable and have the inclination to indicate the direction of the learning process if they are given the chance to do so.

The students' reflections contained in the language biography let us see that behaviours recognised by the theory as belonging to autonomous learners were also shown by students in relation to the learning process. Besides, students' reflections helped them make their voices become heard and this input harmonises with the ultimate goal of attempts oriented to foster learners' autonomy: helping them acquire a voice in the learning process.

On the basis of this evidence, it is viable to conclude that the language portfolio really favors the manifestation of autonomous behaviours among students, although there can be many influencing factors, such as students' previous experiences in language learning and students' level of literacy, that can hinder or constrain the impact that the language portfolio may have in the attempt to promote autonomy.

Just as the patient of the psychoanalyst was to discover the desired element that she needed to master her language by means of her own reflection while she lay on the divan, the participants of this study started to discover the element that they needed to become autonomous users and learners of English by means of their reflection, which was aided by the language portfolio. Thus, the portfolio in this study is the "divan" on which the psychoanalyst places her patient to reflect and discover her/his problem in order to solve it.

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The Author

Carlos Cárdenas has recently received his BA degree in Philology and Languages from Universidad Nacional de Colombia. During his brief teaching experience he has mostly worked with adults over 50. This experience inspired the development of the research project herein described.

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Annex 1

Questionnaire to Survey Past Experience

Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Programa de atención integral al adulto mayor pensionado
y/o beneficiario de Unisalud
Curso de sensibilización al idioma inglés

CUESTIONARIO PARA EXAMINAR EXPERIENCIA PASADA

Por favor lea el cuestionario cuidadosamente y responda tantas preguntas como pueda

1. ¿El profesor de su curso de lengua anterior siempre le explicaba cada detalle?	SI/NO/NO SABE
2. ¿Usted tenía que adivinar cuáles eran las reglas/los significados?	SI/NO/NO SABE
3. ¿Alguna vez el profesor anterior le pidió trabajar en parejas o en grupos?	SI/NO/NO SABE
4. ¿El profesor usualmente se paraba al frente cuando estaba enseñando?	SI/NO/NO SABE
5. ¿El profesor anterior hablaba el idioma extranjero la mayor parte de la clase?	SI/NO/NO SABE
6. ¿Alguna vez tuvo que hablar/escribir de usted mismo en la clase de inglés o de tarea?	SI/NO/NO SABE
7. ¿Recibió un trabajo adicional o una mala nota por no haber hecho la tarea?	SI/NO/NO SABE
8. ¿Alguna vez tuvo que corregir o calificar el trabajo de otro compañero?	SI/NO/NO SABE
9. ¿Alguna vez el profesor le pidió su opinión sobre qué hacer en la clase o cómo le gustaría aprender?	SI/NO/NO SABE
10. ¿El profesor utilizaba con frecuencia otros materiales en clase (o sólo el libro guía)?	SI/NO/NO SABE
11. ¿En especial que le gustó de la forma en que le enseñaron?	SI/NO/NO SABE
12. ¿En especial qué le disgustó de la forma en que le enseñaron?	SI/NO/NO SABE

(Basado en Wright, 1987 p. 134), Universidad de Cambridge 2000.