

Autonomy and Participation: The Challenges of Education on Virtual Modality

Autonomía y Participación: Los Retos de la Educación Virtual

Ángela Patricia Franco Merchán¹
John Felipe Valencia Rodríguez²
Karen Jisseth Ruiz Cortes³
María Fernanda Martínez Martínez⁴
Paula Andrea Bustamente Morales⁵
Sara Daniela Soto Sandoval⁶

1 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, apfrancom@correo.udistrital.edu.co

2 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, jofvalenciar@correo.udistrital.edu.co

3 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, kjruizc@correo.udistrital.edu.co

4 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, mfmartinezm@correo.udistrital.edu.co

5 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, pabustamantem@correo.udistrital.edu.co

6 Undergraduate of Bachelor in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, sdsotos@correo.udistrital.edu.co

Fecha de recepción: 30/10/2020 Fecha de aceptación del artículo: 24/11/2020

Abstract

The autonomy of students in virtual classes has been a challenge since virtual education took place because of the current pandemic situation, bringing new challenges to educational workers. This article is derived from the secondary school practice experience of a group of students from a public university in Bogotá; the researchers of this study present the preliminary results of the ongoing practicum experience subject. It will present the importance of autonomy in the virtual educational context and how it affects the development of classes. This is qualitative research, a case study; the data were collected through field notes and class observations from seven secondary school groups. Findings suggest that participation is a chief variable in virtual class development and the challenges that teachers face are gaining a permanent place in the current educational reality education, qualitative research, pandemic.

Keywords

Autonomy, motivation, participation, virtual education, qualitative research.

Resumen

La autonomía de los estudiantes en las clases virtuales ha sido un reto desde que se implementó la educación virtual debido a la pandemia, lo que ha planteado nuevos desafíos a los educadores. Este artículo surge de la experiencia de práctica de secundaria de un grupo de estudiantes de una universidad pública de Bogotá; los investigadores de este estudio presentan los resultados preliminares de su práctica en curso. Se presentará la importancia de la autonomía en el contexto de la educación virtual y cómo afecta al desarrollo de las clases. Este estudio es una investigación cualitativa, un estudio de caso; los datos se recogieron mediante diarios de campo y observaciones de clases de siete grupos en secundaria. Los resultados sugieren que la participación es una variable principal en el desarrollo de las clases y que los desafíos que enfrentan los profesores están ganando un lugar permanente en la realidad educativa.

Palabras clave

Autonomía, motivación, participación, virtual education, investigación.

Introduction

Nowadays, English has become a must for the professional and educational path. With 360 million native speakers and 500 million who use it as a foreign language, English is the third most spoken language in the world, here in Colombia the government has implemented many strategies to encourage and motivate the student in the second language learning process.

However, the pandemic affected the habits in our social life, particularly, the academic field is struggling in the adaptation of virtual education, some students do not have the resources, and teachers are not trained to develop this new task.

In the researcher's experience, one of the main challenges is connecting virtual education with autonomy, most specifically autonomous participation, Deci y Ryan (2000) cited by Vergara, J. del Valle, M. Díaz, A. Matos, L. & Pérez,

M. (2019) emphasize that autonomous motivation constitutes a key in the psychological process for students to achieve their learning, since it implies the quality and intensity of their energy (strength, intensity, and persistence) driven by the individual to perform a behavior, and that is actually what is missing in virtual education.

This article provides insights obtained in a case study developed in a Colombian public school, regarding problematic situations teachers probably face during virtual education: Autonomous participation in class.

Researchers used different theories to analyze some strategies that may be assumed in their role as teachers. Also, it might allow researchers to highlight key aspects of autonomy in the online teaching context as well as provide evidence that contributes to the analysis of teaching strategies in a virtual context.

1. Literature review

The following constructs and research products have had a remarkable impact on this study, because of the importance of autonomy. Hence, the literature review describes the contribution of scholars since conceptualizing the forms of academic development of autonomy within the COVID-19 context. Holec (1981) defined Autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". Thus, there is a relationship between student's performance and autonomy, considering that student's autonomy fosters strategies taken for successful learning. In this research, the autonomy of students is analyzed by using field notes, written reflections, and emerging variables taken from participation and observation forms.

According to Oxford, R. (1990), learning strategies are those steps taken by students to enhance their learning. In this project, learning strategies seek to enhance students' learning from reflective planning and adapting to teaching material. Learning strategies also are linked with the autonomy of each student, since the degree of

autonomy leads to the initiative of learning strategies.

Benson, P. (1997) cited by Dávila & Merrill, (2020) proposes three versions of autonomous language learning (technical, psychological, and political) that are strongly related to three approaches of knowledge, learning, and language (positivism, constructivism, and critical theory). In this regard, technical autonomy may be related to taking part, interacting, or even developing the proposed activities within the lesson. The psychological dimension refers to how the learning process is being triggered through feelings and assertive linguistic input. However, the focus of this paper is centered on the technical version of autonomous learning. Likewise, political autonomy is strictly focused on the inner settings of teaching practices involving political actions and social change. Thus, despite the suitable and appropriate settled maxims, only the technical version of autonomy would be addressed from observation and teaching planning development analysis.

Dickinson (in Gardner and Miller, 1999) refers to autonomous learning as “a situation in which the learner is responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning”. In this sense, the role of the teacher must be complemented with the awareness of the responsibility of each learner.

This implies the construction of a class of collaborative roles, where a responsible educator and the responsible learner (autonomous) work together for a successful learning process.

Schmenk (2005) states “educators admit that it (autonomy) encompasses a critical awareness of one’s possibilities and limitations within particular contexts’ (p. 115) this is an important factor for the learner since its critical awareness lead him or her to objectively evaluate its possibilities and act in consequence to achieve learning. Therefore, they preferred working many times by themselves instead of collaborating with their partners.

A balance of critical awareness and autonomy may be related to learning performance. The emerging variables from the reflections and emerging variables may reveal evidence that sustains how Critical Awareness in autonomy affects the performance of students.

Serdyukova N, Serdyukov P, (2013) perspective addresses two major aspects: the learner autonomy and the online environments, it claims the first one is directly related to innovation and creativity in the online-teaching environment.

Moreover, the research evidenced a paradox, while those students preferred having an organized group to follow a lead since they lack learning skills, time management, and motivation. They do not have confidence in their potential partners and feel uncomfortable depending on the people they don’t know.

According to the aforementioned findings, autonomy is a skill that should be improved to endeavor successful learning strategies when students decide or have to do tasks on their own. Conclusions that contribute to this case study are the prompts of actions for improving the students' autonomy such as, including students' ideas within the courses and their organization, to identify their goals and personal objectives. Implementation of meaningful and creative assignments, and clear and specific assessment E.Ribbe & M.J. Bezanilla, (2013) concerns the ways teachers and course designers influence the endeavor of learner autonomy among online students.

The research established that lack of attention to this autonomy is participating in the dropouts rates in online learning. Three principles regarding scaffolding challenges are stated for improving learner autonomy. First, the inclusion of learners in determining learning goals, contents, and activities. Second, supporting self-monitoring and self-evaluation form learners, and third, the immersion of authentic learning

environments. The study concluded that reflections on learner's autonomy are an important goal of all learning processes in the design and tutoring of online courses. Besides, the tutors are in charge of multiple important roles since learner autonomy is not a synonym for leaving students abandoned.

Finally, the research states as crucial to support learner autonomy, that tutors possess a high level of autonomy as well and are capable to incorporate scaffolds in the learner autonomy through online sessions.

Handayani W, (2015) focuses on the Internet use for promoting students' autonomy in language learning, pointed out specifically for improving students' competency in speaking.

It will concern some internet links that can be used for speaking study. The learners can study by using these internet links independently and record their voice and video for their own self-assessment. Encouraging them to be able to determine priorities in the learning process and commit to it. Handayani mentioned that online

educational technology provides more options for English teaching and learning, by enabling learners to use their learning style and resources. Besides, how the internet is used can payback for the lack of no real English environment, and will strongly encourage English autonomy learning

Zhong, Q. M. (2018) evidenced how learner autonomy is shaped and reshaped in online learning environments. The main goal is to analyze how a learner develops autonomy within technology-mediated environments to meet his English learning needs. Becoming this student into a critical user of multiple online resources, he decided to lean on computers and the Internet for assistance and to do self-directed learning. He became a collaborative online learner as well. Since he regarded himself as a highly competent user of computers, therefore he was always available to help other students who had problems with computer skills. And finally, he became more capable of managing time and planning his learning.

Teachers must create a learning condition through which control over learning can be exercised by the learner and where the learner has the possibility of assuming responsibility. With the advent of technologies, learners are faced with unprecedented opportunities to conduct independent learning. And this case study showed a student, acting as an active agent, and taking advantage of the unique learning opportunities that technologies provided for him. Concerning autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghazali (2020) proposes that disrupted classes do not necessarily mean disrupted learning when self-access learning is facilitated, appropriate training is given, and students' motivation and autonomy are enhanced.

Therefore, the awareness of each role (educator and learner) may imply the opposite of disrupted learning, this is, effective learning.

Finally, Dávila & M Merril (2020) pointed out that when students use learning strategies, being aware of the importance of these, they are becoming autonomous language learners.

It also highlights that the early stages of autonomous language learning in children produce the presence of autonomous language learning characteristics such as control over resources, collaborative group work and decision-making, and the creation of self-access materials.

Therefore, when autonomous learners implement learning strategies, the virtual classroom becomes a space where propositive decision-making may emerge, eg participation, questioning, or collaborative group work.

2. Methodology

This is an ongoing project that took place at the subject "Secondary School Practicum" in a public university in Bogotá, the practitioners belong to the Bachelor Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

The study was conducted with a population of six groups of 10th grade and one group from 11th grade from a middle-class public school located in the seventh municipality of Bosa in Bogota, the students' ages ranged from 15 to 18

years old, all of them belong to the same institution.

The classes took place virtually in regards to the upcoming challenge of COVID-19, teaching practicum scenario has been modified towards virtual teaching. This new setting has led us, as practitioners and researchers, to make a reflective process during the teaching practice exercise, to identify some specific traits that are common among the groups regarding autonomous processes during the virtual classes, this is a preliminary study that continues being analyzed.

The nature of this study has certainly defined qualitative variables within the frame of qualitative research, according to Creswell (2012) some of its characteristics are the need to explain and the relation among different variables, the qualitative research aims to analyze trends, groups and compare them to past research evidence. Some important aspects of the aforementioned variables are "an attribute (e.g., attitude toward the school bond issue) or characteristic of individuals (e.g., gender) that researchers study. By

explaining a relationship among variables, you are interested in determining whether one or more variables might influence another variable.” (Cresswell, 2012, p.13) In this study, one variable is autonomy in students, and how it could affect their learning process. This qualitative research which encompasses the case of study, as Carrillo (2020) pinpointed “a case study is the deep analysis of a phenomenon” and Johnson (2014) described it as “The study of a phenomenon in an open-ended way, without prior expectations, and develop hypotheses and theoretical explanations that are based on interpretations” this can be understood as the results depend more on the population characteristics and the further results analysis; other important aspects in a case study were stated by Yin (being cited by Griffee, 2012) “a case study must have three aspects, which can serve as a definition: it must have data from multiple sources, examine something in a real-life context, and use theory to generalize results.”

The data was gathered mainly through class observations, as Moser & Korstjens (2018) pinpointed there are

four types of observations in a qualitative study, one in which the person takes part in the action as a “complete participant”, in this study the practitioners developed their classes virtually using different virtual platforms; the second type as “active participation” in which the researcher has access to the setting and can observe; it can relate this type to this study because all the practitioners can join to other classes and observe the lesson’s development. The third type is “moderate participation”.

The role in this type is more passive, in this study can be seen having access to other practitioners' video recordings and diaries. Finally, the last type is “complete observer”; the researcher or observant merely observers and does not take part in the research process.

Regarding the second instrument diaries and field notes that the practitioners used to track information during the observation process and it is linked to the data collection tool that the researchers had selected, in this study the field notes, as Creswell (2012, p. 216) described them “The data recorded during an observation are called field

notes. Field Notes are text (words) recorded by the researcher during an observation in a qualitative study” he additionally divided into two, these categories play a key role in the results, Cresswell stated that are divided into two categories “Descriptive field notes record a description of the events, activities, and people (e.g., what happened). Reflective field notes record personal thoughts that researchers have that relate to their insights, hunches, or broad ideas or themes that emerge during the observation.” Tracking the information while the action is taking place is essential to avoid losing details about the specific situation and develop further reflections.

The most relevant variables that the researchers found in the field notes were regarding students’ participation through asking questions or answering them, the social interaction, attention, and the collaboration perceived along with the class; the results are explained in the following components.

2.1 Methodological secondary component

In this section, the researchers present the overall background of the on-going project, supported by the instruments that were used to gather data during the classes’ observations processes. As mentioned earlier, the descriptive and reflective field notes are presented in the results, represented by the Observation Evaluation Format and Pair observation class analysis respectively.

2.1.1 Chart 1 *Observation Evaluation Format*

Chart summarizes the variables that were carried out and the outcomes in the observation forms in terms of students’ participation and interactions, the information gathered using the instruments during the practicum, specifically the pair observation, the format had the option to specify the grade and the time of the class, information that is reflected on the first column.

In the next column, is the individual work, where it is possible to see the different aspects regarding the whole class experience and the students' reactions individually, it is grade from 1 to 5, 5 being the highest score.

In the third column the group work, which is more oriented to the students' interaction as a group, taking into account the entire group reaction when grading the teaching experience. Therefore, in the last column, the close question refers to how students feel in the class. This instrument provides an overall of answers based on their final reactions when ending the classes and their own comments.

Table 1. Observation Evaluation Format.

Chart 1. Observation Evaluation Format

Class observations	Individual work	Group work	SS seems to like it.
Grade 10-02 7:00 a.m.	Attention 3 Participation 3 Asking 1 Answering 3 Compliance 3	Social interaction 2 Propositive 2 Critic 1 Collaborative 2 Perceptive 3	Yes
Grade 10-01 8:00 a.m.	Attention 3 Participation 3 Asking 1 Answering 2 Compliance 3	Social interaction 2 Propositive 2 Critic 1 Collaborative 2 Perceptive 3	Yes
Grade 10-02 9:00 a.m.	Attention 2 Participation 2 Asking 1 Answering 2 Compliance 3	Social interaction 2 Propositive 2 Critic 1 Collaborative 2 Perceptive 3	Yes
Grade 11 9:00 a.m.	Attention 4 Participation 3 Asking 2 Answering 3 Compliance 3	Social interaction 3 Propositive 2 Critic 1 Collaborative 3 Perceptive 3	Yes
Grade 10-06 9:00 a.m.	Attention 2 Participation 2 Asking 1 Answering 2 Compliance 2	Social interaction 3 Propositive 3 Critic 1 Collaborative 3 Perceptive 3	Yes

This chart is own authorship, 2020.

2.1.2 Chart 2 *Pair observation class analysis.*

Chart 2 contains the information of 3 pair observation formats, from different classes, at different times and activities, where pre-service teachers were observing class management and development using the variables presented on the previous chart.

As shown in the comments at the end of the format where after the class, they may provide their own opinion about the positive and negative traits of the pedagogical intervention, the following chart summarises the most common variable exposed in the instrument.

Table 2. Pair Observation Formats.

Chart 2. Pair observation class analysis

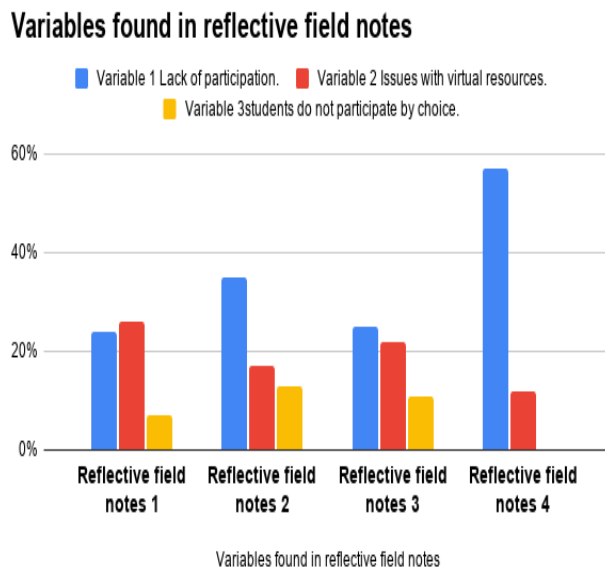
<p>X1- They were very attentive and committed to the class even though participation was not from every student, the ones that did participate seem to understand everything very clear</p>	<p>X2- The main problems among many current online classes is the lack of participation from students, no matter the activity they do not seem willing to contribute to their learning process, therefore, the issue may arise from the students' attitude and autonomy than from the lesson plans or preparations</p>	<p>X3- The class was good, the teachers were aware of the topic, the resources they have and the assessment they wanted to perform with the Ss, but still there are some things to work on like the students' attention and participation, as well as the rhythm and their tone of voices, those may sound a little bit plain, and Ss may be boring and ignore the actual lesson.</p>
--	---	--

This chart is own authorship, 2020.

2.1.3 Chart 3 Reflective field notes and analysis graphic.

In the graphic below, the researchers used the data extracted from the observations made by the students, in Axis Y we can find the impact (in percentage) of every variable found in class which is represented by colors (Blue: Variable 1- Lack of participation. Red: Variable 2 -Issues with virtual resources and Yellow: Variable 3 - Students do not participate by choice.) On the other hand, in Axis X we can find the source of the information presented.

Figure 1. Analysis graphic: from the observations made by the students.



This chart is own authorship, 2020.

3. Findings

The following section comprises basic data analysis and findings from what is being collected regarding the pandemic. Table 1 Observation Evaluation Format compiles the information about all the different grades and which aspects are evaluating.

The individual work evaluates attention, participation, answering, and compliance in the different courses. The data collected reveal that previous aspects are positive but are not enough taking into account the qualification level. The “asking aspect” is the one that evidences more gaps.

This implies that students rather avoid their participation when the teachers are explaining and it is assumed that the class content was understood. Another aspect of the table is the teamwork which assessment is the lowest. Social interaction, propositive, critic, collaborative, and perceptive are far below average. This aspect may emerge from the fact that classes are

taken in a virtual context, therefore the classroom interaction stops being collective and each student assumes the classes a personal role for his performance during.

The last part of the table shows if the class is interested in them if they like it, and there is a positive response for each course. Here we take into account the motivation of the students, the development of the activities, and creativity are a fundamental factor in virtual education.

Chart #2 reflects the analysis of 3 different classes, where the pre-service teachers had the option to add a comment highlighting the possible problems or aspects they may see as an improvement option.

In the three comments, it may see that the Pre-service teachers take into account the same problem, highlighting the lack of participation and interest from the students during the completion of the class tasks. Also, they pointed that students Attitude and responses affected the development of the topic having incidence over the class topic and

development of the tasks. From character description analysis, It can be found at **Reflective field notes analysis graphic**, that it is seen that from 100% text constitution there is a remarkable lack of participation considering that each text encompasses, introduction, development and the conclusion from the whole development of the class that is being guided. Each class was planned from a task-based approach, then pre-task, task, and post-task was planned based on the necessities of students, so it can ensure students' participation for the accurate development of the class activities and corresponding outcome.

The analysis is in the initial phase, recognition of variables from the instruments used while the development of the classes.

Here the number of the characters was used taking into account that narratives have a narrative structure, introduction, problem, and conclusions, where they talk about the whole development of the class. Here are also found secondary variables such as issues with the virtual resources and lack of knowledge about how to use them, as well as the students' rejection for participating during the task

appliance. The results of the information are proposed as a graphic, where it can be found the percentage of words related to the variable.

In conclusion, the current pandemic has increased the challenges education workers might have as teachers in their daily work, they were not able to train or even think about new strategies to implement during virtual education. Besides that, teachers are also going through a process of self-recognition and identifying new challenges, such as Students' motivation, evaluation, and the one highlighted in this text: autonomy.

However, facing these challenges with recursive ideas and activities is promoting the construction of new realities that imply personal and professional growth. The process of being part of a virtual society is still new. Though, it grants situations and realities that need to be discussed and recognized as part of the future teaching structures.

Bibliographic References

Moser, A. & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection, and analysis, *European Journal of General Practice*, 24:1, 9-18, DOI: 10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091

Benson, P. (1997). *autonomy & Independence in Language Learning. The Philosophy and politics of learning autonomy*. Addison –Wesley Longman Limited. Harlow, United Kingdom.

Carrillo, C. C.E. (2020). *El Filtro Afectivo Positivo como Estrategia de Estimulación Neurocognitiva para la Modificación de Conductas Negativas en un niño en Condición de Discapacidad (Vol. 1)*. Universidad Libre.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research (4.a ed.)*. Prentice-Hall College Div.

Davila & M. Merril. (2020). *Autonomous language learning behaviors and*

- learning strategies in the use of a self – access center resources. *INNOVATION IN ELT*.
- Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behaviour. *Psychological Inquiry*.
- Ribbe, E. & Bezanilla, M.J. (2013). Scaffolding Learner Autonomy In Online University Course. *Digital Education Review - Number 24, December 2013-*
- Gardner, D. & Miller, L. (1999). Establishing self – access. From theory to practice. Press Syndicate of University of Cambridge. Cambridge, England.
- Ghazali, F. Al. (2020). Challenges and Opportunities of Fostering Learner Autonomy and Self-Access Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*. Sep2020, Vol. 11 Issue 3, p114-127. 14p
- Griffiee, D. (2012). *An Introduction to Second Language Research Methods* (First Edition, Vol. 1). Dale T. Griffiee and TESL-EJ Publications.
- Handayani, W. (2015). Utilization of Internet for Autonomous Learning in Speaking, Volume 4 –No.2, 111-114
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and independence in foreign language learning*. Strasbourg, Council of Europe.
- Johnson, R. B. & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational Research (Fifth Edition)*. California, United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Oxford, R. (1990). *Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know*. Newbury house publishers. New York, United States of America.
- Serdyukova, N. & Serdyukov, P. (2013). Student Autonomy in Online Learning, In *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Computer Supported Education (CSEDU-2013)*, pages 229–233.
- Schmenk, B. (2005). Globalizing learner autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly* 39.1, 107–118.
- Vergara, J. del Valle, M. Diaz, A. Matos, L. & Pérez. M. (2019). Efecto mediador

de la motivación autónoma en el
aprendizaje | Revista Electrónica de
Investigación Educativa.
[https://redie.uabc.mx/redie/article/view/
2131](https://redie.uabc.mx/redie/article/view/2131)

Zhong, Q. M. (2018). The evolution of
learner autonomy in online
environments: A case study in a New
Zealand context. *Studies in Self-Access
Learning Journal*, 9(1), 71-85.

All the charts were our authorship based on
the data collected on the observations done in class.