

**Autonomy Strategies:  
A Way to Reach Bilingualism in Boyacá**  
**Estrategias para la autonomía:  
un camino para lograr el bilingüismo  
en Boyacá**

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Recepción: 09 de abril de 2009  
Aprobación: 19 de mayo de 2009

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a description of a research proposal that is taking place at a secondary school in Maripí, Boyacá. The proposal addresses the issue of autonomy and how it improves language learning in this particular context. The subjects of the study are tenth graders, ranging in age from 13 to 16 years old. The paper presents a general view of the context where the research is being carried out and the rationale behind the proposal. This is a new possible way to reach bilingual students in our particular contexts.

**Key words:** autonomy, autonomous learning, learning strategies, teacher's roles, students' roles.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta una descripción de una propuesta investigativa que se está llevando a cabo en un colegio de secundaria en Maripí, Boyacá. La propuesta aborda el tema de la autonomía y cómo esta mejora el aprendizaje de las lenguas en este contexto particular. Los sujetos de esta investigación son adolescentes entre los 13 y 16 años de edad, quienes cursan décimo grado. El artículo presenta una caracterización general del contexto donde se está llevando a cabo la investigación y el fundamento que sustenta dicha propuesta.

**Palabras clave:** autonomía, aprendizaje autónomo, estrategias de aprendizaje, papel del docente, papel de aprendiz.

## **Introduction**

English has become the universal language to have access to a globalized world. According to the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) the majority of students in Colombia have chosen English as their language of studies among French, German, Italian and Chinese. Learning English is and will be an obligation for students in Colombia. As a consequence, in the near future, apprentices will be more competitive and will have more opportunities to study and work abroad. In order to be successful when learning English, students need to receive the best language preparation which is first given in the school settings. However, the socio-economic conditions of a country, like Colombia, do not guarantee the same academic preparation for all its citizens; that is the case of rural and semirural schools where students not only lack of some academic resources but also the number of hours of English language instruction is minimal. As a result, teachers, administrators and everyone involved in the field of education look for strategies to achieve national and international standards in this globalized world.

The Colombian Government has promoted the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo which has as a main goal to have bilingual citizens in the Colombian territory by the end of the year 2019. In order to guarantee this goal is being achieved, the MEN has decided to use european standards as a reference to evaluate the competence of its citizens. For instance, the goal of Colombian Government is to have high schoolers who finish eleventh grade in a B1 level according to the Common European Framework (CEF)

Local governments have decided to invest in teacher training and preparation programs in order to guarantee better student performance. By improving the quality of teaching, it is expected better learning. Nonetheless, teachers whose contexts make difficult to reach the government goals need to work on some strategies for achieving success when implementing the government laws. For this reason, schools need to adapt to these new circumstances of the country and the world. Schools need to be opened to more dynamic learning changes.

LEVELS ACCORDING TO THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK	COMMON NAME OF THE LEVEL IN COLOMBIA	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL IN WHICH EXPECTS TO DEVELOP EACH LEVEL OF TONGUE	GOALS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR TO 2019
A1	Beginner	1 to 3 grades	
A2	Basic	4 to 7 grades	
B1	Pre- Intermediate	8 to 11 grades	. Minimum level for the 100% of the graduates of average education
B2	Intermediate	Higher education	. Minimum level for English teachers Minimum level for professionals of other careers
C1	Pre - Advanced		. Minimum level for the new graduates of degrees in languages
C2	Advanced		

**Taken from:** Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006. Serie Guías N.º 22.

Teachers need to formulate their own goals and create their own innovative strategies to share with the students and facilitate the process to become bilingual citizens. Contexts like the one described in this project will have difficulties to reach the desired goals of having bilingual students by the year 2019 if administrators and everybody involved in this process do not have strategies to improve students' English level. As it can be seen the impact of the Bilingual Program in local educational policies is significant.

Observing that three hours per week is not enough for learning English at "Institución Educativa Jorge Eliécer Gaitán", I have decided to implement some autonomous strategies to fulfill the lack of class instruction, to actively involve learners in their educational process, and to get better students' language skills by providing practice on their own. By means of this autonomy, students improve language skills, parents get involved in the learning process, teachers have a different role and the school achieves national standards in the long term. As a result, the research project has as main objectives to identify and apply autonomous strategies in order to improve students' language proficiency level and in this way to fulfill the lack of hour of instruction in semirural areas.

The present research proposal was based on the reflection of several years of teaching practice; first, as a primary school teacher and at present time as a secondary school teacher. Most of the students do not know how to organize the time and to put in practice

what they have been learning. Many apprentices believe that the learning practice at school is enough to learn the new language; some of them may even believe that the only person in charge of the educational process is the teacher. But the reality is that students do not achieve the goals proposed by the MEN. Although, I cannot change the number of hour of instruction, as a teacher researcher I can identify which strategies may fulfill this lack of time and in this way improve students' learning. Since most of students do not develop extra class activities in order to reinforce the learning process, the project will provide new strategies for this population. Encouraging autonomous learning strategies in and outside the classroom will also increase motivation which results in the improvement of the learning process. Students will explore possible strategies that will help them regulate and monitor their own learning process.

### **Method**

The project described in this article focuses on the following research questions:

- 1) What kind of autonomy strategies improve students' proficiency in rural areas?
- 2) In which way do teachers and parents enhance autonomous learning?

### **Subquestions**

- 1) What are the student's attitudes towards autonomous learning?
- 2) What are the parents' perceptions about autonomous learning?
- 3) What are the teachers' and parents' roles in the process of having more autonomous students?

The study consisted of:

- a. Identifying autonomy strategies to improve language learning in rural areas.
- b. Defining the role of teachers and parents in the process of having autonomous learners.
- c. Finding autonomy strategies to improve students' performance and achieve government goals.

### **Participants**

The research project is being carried out at Institución Educativa Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Maripí, Boyacá. This is a public school located in the west of Boyacá, Colombia. The participants are 42 tenth graders, 25 females and 17 males. Due to its geographical location, the institution serves students from the rural and semirural area.

The school has 346 students from sixth to eleven grade and their ages are between 12 to 17. There are fifteen teachers working with them. Most of the students seem to enjoy hands on activities, watching a video and singing songs. Many of the families work in pursuit of better living conditions and educational opportunities for their children. In the school context, most the selected group of students show special abilities and interests in learning English as a Foreign Language.

### **Autonomous Learning**

Many ideas spring our minds when we speak about autonomous learning. We believe that all the activities the student must perform alone without any help is related to this approach. On the contrary, in this methodology the student must be in constant interaction with their teacher and classmates. At present the student is the center of the learning process and everything about learning and teaching process are focused on him. The teacher is the guider and motivator in order to help the students to get the proposed goals. The purpose of this study is that students identify their strengths and weaknesses to go ahead, when fostering autonomy.

### **Why Autonomous Learning?**

It has been observed that students are not achieving the goals proposed by the MEN. Some of the reasons are the lack of hours of instruction to develop the basic skills. Students do not have enough time to practice the studied themes; also teachers are seen many times as the ones who control the learning process; students need to be more independent and understand teachers are facilitators and there is much more apprentices can do.

Through this project, I will foster the appropriate autonomous learning strategies in order to have students go ahead in the learning process. Moreover, most of the learners do not develop extra class activities in order to reinforce the learning process. Maybe, they are waiting for having new strategies that help them to practice the English language.

### **Defining Autonomy**

When talking about autonomous learning we traditionally have in mind the learner working alone at home or in class without any support of classmates, the teacher or the parents. On the contrary, this approach has a high interaction and interdependence. According to Benson, autonomy is "the capacity to take control of one's own learning". (2001, p. 47). This control can be taken by working with others or having the support of others, mainly if one considers that human beings need from others in all the stages of life. In this respect, Vygotsky argues that "new levels of autonomy are achieved only through interaction with other under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". If we take this in mind, this guidance may be provided by the teacher or any adult involved in the learning

process. In our specific case, parents and teachers may help learners control their process by helping their children to reach autonomy.

Sinclair says: "the study of learner autonomy requires careful interpretation of the particular cultural, social, political and educational context in which it is located" (2000, p. 6). The students where this research is taking place come from rural and semirural areas. Most of them are rural help their parents, especially in sowing sugar cane to get a sweet called "panela". The majority of the community is composed by low income families, they are small farmers who a few years ago did illicit farming such as coca. However, this community is overcoming their difficulties with legal farming and in the last years the number of students in the school has been growing.

They hope to have good learning experiences in the school. The school has a "bilingual classroom", but the computers are not updated, so they do not work. In spite of their difficulties and lack of resources they need to practice new ways in order to overcome these difficulties. They practice autonomy activities like the homework, but not everybody do it. Maybe, they do not have the sufficient motivation to work autonomous activities set out the classroom.

However, if we give the students more participation in decision making about planning the learning activities; they will be more motivated to improve their English proficiency.

About the role of the students in the autonomous learning process, Sinclair states: "it is necessary for learners to be encouraged to reflect consciously on their learning through planning, experimenting and reviewing, and to have opportunities to make decisions about their learning" (2000, p. 11). This research proposal could provide alternatives where the students have the opportunity to express what they want to do for improving the strategies to get better learners of the target language.

At present, the teacher is still involved in traditional practices. She has the control of the class, makes suggestions or imposes the learning activities in and outside the classroom. But the dynamics of new ways of learning make that the control of the learning process be shared with the students.

### **The Role of Teachers and Parents**

There are many ways to involve parents in the school. Some policies of the government suggest that the school needs to engage parents in the learning process of their children. The parents' involvement is evident in the primary school level; however, I consider this accompaniment should continue in the secondary level. For example, parents could support their children by fostering students' autonomy outside the classroom.

Teachers and parents are the main characters in the students learning process, they could also help to control or monitoring the process of learning. If the students realize that they are interested in improving their English learning, they will continue learning fast and in a more enjoyable way. As teachers we have to favor reflective moments to plan with students in or extra school activities to learn English. At this point, involving parents by doing a controlling process of learning could be part of the learning process.

Identifying the role of parents and teachers in order to have more autonomous language learners is also one of the objectives of this proposal. In that way the relationship between parents, students and teachers could be more dynamic.

The present research project intends to identify the strategies to become ESL autonomous learners and explain what happen when the teacher and the parents support this autonomy.

### **Teachers Roles in Autonomous Settings**

Traditionally and even at present, the teacher has been taking the control of almost everything in the classroom. He decided what to teach, what the students need to learn and the way or methodology to practice. The students are just the receptors of the knowledge.

Nowadays, this role has been changing. The teacher needs to keep updated in new ways of teaching and learning, and planning with the students the activities for developing in the classroom according to the desires and students' needs.

At present, students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies and the teacher needs to let them hear their voices, reflecting on their learning and in that way start a process of becoming autonomous learners.

At this time the role of the teacher will change from authoritarian to guider or adviser. According to Sinclair "the encouragement of positive attitudes towards taking on more responsibility and the development of greater metacognitive awareness, respectively. This implies an important supporting role for the teacher, the learning consultant/counsellor, the distance learning tutor and the self-access facilitator" (2000, p. 9).

The role of the teacher as guider will make better autonomous students. Reflecting with the students about the learning process could be an opportunity to construct a better learning collaborating process. We need to guide a more independent learner in order to overcome the traditional dependence of the teacher favor.

The new teacher needs to encourage the students to be more dynamic in order to participate and help teacher to make decisions. About this point of view Ellis states: "Reviewing needs

to be built into classes on a systematic basis to help pupils understand what and how they have been learning and to perceive their progress and maintain motivation" (2000, p. 82). So, the teacher has to be controlling and helping the students' learning needs.

In a reflection, Lamb advises: "Teachers need to be prepared to encourage their pupils to work independently inside and outside the classroom" (2000, p. 125).

Also the well known Brazilian philosopher Paul Freire(1970) cited by Denson, about the role of the teacher suggest: "to present knowledge in the form of problems that engage students in dialogue and reflection, leading to the analysis of their social realities for the purpose of transforming them" (2001, p. 29).

Moreover, the teacher should promote reflection on learning for applying some learning strategies such as: let the students decide what homework they want to do or to encourage them to write journals to suggest activities to develop in class; or get the students to make their own dialogues with new language, how dictionaries work and then learn how to use them. So, we will need to offer them choices in learning strategies.

Once again, about the role of the teacher, Little (1995), cited by Benson, says: "the teacher must decide on the areas in which they will to promote learning autonomy. She must decide, in other words, whether and to what extent it is possible for the learners to determine their own learning objectives, select their own learning materials and contribute to the assessment of their learning process" (p. 116). So, the teacher is the principal guider in this process for making decisions about what to do or not to do in the participation of the learners in their ESL autonomous learning process.

### **Parents' Role in Autonomous Learning**

Throughout the history the family has had an important educational role. The child's growth is permanently supported by their parents with emotions, beliefs, teaching of behaviors using the language. Taking into account that parents are illiterate and also they do not know anything about the target language. I need to choose and think the role of them.

Maybe some reflection about controlling if the students use the time to do the activities and to promote a good environment, such a table to feel comfortable their sons or girls is a good role for them.

At this time the family plays a role of mediation, control or motivation in helping the students in this process. This research project will be supported by parents who promote autonomy at home in that way. It will be taking in mind the autonomy activities outside the classroom where parents could help their sons as motivators and controllers of the homework.

Parents need to play a more dynamic role in the learning process. They have begun the process of education since the early age of the student. In primary school they share this responsibility with the teacher. However, in secondary school level, the students want to be more independent from parents and this relationship is interrupted. It can generate some learning difficulties as lack of motivation in the students. Also, parents do not have the disposition of time and knowledge to help them with the homework. But they share the social responsibility to be successful. These factors are crucial when planning autonomous strategies outside the classroom.

Parents could play the role of informers if their children work the activities at home or not. In that way they could help the students for supporting autonomous learning activities outside the classroom. Therefore, show to parents that they are playing an important role in this process and that learning a foreign language is very important in the future students' lives. They will realize that learning a foreign language is a good investment for their children's future.

#### Motivation as a Strategy to Support the Process

Autonomous learning is based on a high involvement of the participants.

Reflection and motivation are two key aspects that involve autonomy in ESL learning. For example, reflection takes place when moments of crisis or difficulties occur. The lack of time to take an English course and the impossibility of fulfilling the standards for tenth graders are an opportunity to make a reflection of how, when and what to practice the target language using autonomous learning strategies.

This reflection needs to be followed by action. In this action teacher and learners share new forms of practicing the target language in spite of the lack of time and resources. In this way the student take the control of its own learning of process. To be autonomous learners is a process and it needs from the others. "Learning is a spiral process in which we move to new levels of autonomy only by first moving through new phases of dependence" (cited by Little, 2000, p. 18). The same could happen in learning the target language. The teacher needs to involve the learners in collaborative activities to share learning strategies or overcoming difficulties in a place like the classroom. So, the role of the teacher could change from just teaching to help their students for learning to learn.

The students think about what they have learnt and start to get them reflecting on their learning. Also, it is necessary to take into account motivation as one variable that influences autonomy. And the teachers play a crucial role in this process. According to Dörnyei (1998, p. 118), cited by Benson, "cognitive approaches to motivation focus on 'the individual's thoughts and beliefs (and recently also emotions) that are transformed into action'".

Moreover, "Learners who are intrinsically motivated carry out activities for the pleasure of learning, for the satisfaction of achievement or to experience stimulation" (Vallerand, 1997, cited by Benson, 2007, p. 69).

When the teacher encourages the learners on a reflection on what and how they would learn and practice the target language, the students start to control their own learning process.

#### Possible Impact of the Project

Developing autonomy in the students implies a change in the students and teacher roles. Traditionally teachers have been seen as wise people and the ones who control the class by making decision. In autonomous environments both teachers and students are active participants of the learning process. This research project intends to go beyond by involving parents. Outside the classroom parents could control their children by providing opportunities to self monitor and by checking independent learning. In consequence, this role of parents could support the autonomous activities developed in the school.

Autonomy entails successful language learning. By applying some autonomous strategies, it is expected students to be more responsible on their own learning. Teacher and parents encourage a change in attitudes, although this change is not immediate, students may move from one degree of autonomy to another.

If students improve language learning, they will get better results in national exams which will facilitate the bilingual process since students will reach the desired outcomes. Autonomy may be the key for improving students' learning difficulties and lack of instructional time. Having more autonomous learners in rural areas is the best way to get the goals the government propose.

By helping students to be autonomous learners they will be more committed to do some independent work in terms of preparation for standard exams. Students will be engaged in the English language learning process and will improve their learning. There are many strategies the student could use in order to become autonomous learners in and outside the classroom. These strategies will be planned by the teacher and the students.

Parents need to assume a new role. Parents should do more than attending meetings or receiving the reports from the teacher. They need to participate in helping their children become autonomous students by controlling the activities at home and outside the classroom. If this happens, we will have a more dynamic learning community.

We need to build responsibility on the students. This is the role of teachers and parents. According to Scharle and Szabó(2000), "If learners are to take more responsibility for their learning they need to have more influence on the learning process. This calls for a real

location of some tasks and decisions in classroom work, so that students can get more involved for example in choosing learning materials or correcting mistakes" (p. 8-9).

One of them could consist in identifying alternative strategies and approaches for engaging students taking into account their own suggestions about the activities they want to develop. For example, in creating alternative educational materials for learning English, such as, the countryside context. If the students have support and know strategies, they will have better learners during their lives.

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