Fostering Environmental Autonomy Support in an English Course for Middle School Learners in Western México

Fernando Peralta-Castro

Universidad de Colima, Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras, México

Abstract

The scope of this study is to observe features of environmental autonomy support and to identify aspects of autonomy. To this end, a case study was designed and implemented in a state school in the western region of Mexico, with the participation of twelve secondary school pupils, ages 12 to 14, who attended a non-required 40-hour course using the autonomous learning approach. A research journal was kept tracking the whole process, gaining knowledge of autonomous learning and examining the phenomenon in a real-life context. The journals were analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti software, and the researcher made inferences from the resulting data, including environmental autonomy support as well as the reactions of the pupils to the autonomous learning process. The analysis of data reveals the language-learning context and its tendency to foster an autonomy-supportive atmosphere. Data seems to cast light on two major issues: the importance of fostering an environment that encourages autonomous learning-related behavior, and the necessity of providing appropriate scaffolding strategies to assist students in their development of autonomous learning. The study provides valuable insights into autonomy support and autonomous learning in education, but its limitations include a small sample size and potential challenges in generalizing findings to broader contexts.

Keywords: *Environmental Autonomy, Autonomy Support, Learning English, México*

Introduction

In recent decades, interest in autonomous learning has significantly increased. The literature on autonomy in language teaching and learning was examined by Benson (2001) from its beginning in the mid-1970s to the year 2000. Holec (1981) produced a significant paper on autonomy in language teaching in which autonomy was defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p 3). Hence, over a long period of time, practical applications that prioritized autonomous learning were pursued, which resulted in the development of self-access centers and learner training programs (Benson, 2007).

Even though learner autonomy has been associated with "a radical restructuring of language pedagogy [including] the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working" (Allwright, 1988, p. 35), when implementing this kind of innovation, the educational environment in which it will be used must be taken into account. There is currently a call for research on autonomy in the field of education and research the world over, and Mexico's Department for National Strategic Programs (known in Spanish as PRONACES) has encouraged universities nationwide to undertake research projects in keeping with its mandates and lines of research. This paper stems from the participation of the University of Colima in PRONACES, and centers on a research project on the promotion of autonomy through educational processes a secondary school level.

This project was implemented in a rural town in the state of Colima, in Western Mexico. A 40-hour English course was designed, following the principles and practices of autonomous learning and was taught by two Foreign Language Teaching undergraduate students. Participating pupils were middle school learners, aged from 12 to 14, who attended the 2-hour sessions of their own volition. Each of the 20 lessons focused on the development of one or more strategies and skills intended to support autonomous learning. Investigating the features of environmental autonomy support, and aspects of autonomy in a context where the teaching approach is more commonly inclined to focus on the teacher, could lead to a deeper understanding of learner autonomy and the role that supportive autonomy plays in the effort to encourage and nurture traits and actions that foster autonomy. Results could also provide valuable insights into how language learning can be enhanced through learner autonomy, and how students can develop essential skills that will serve them well throughout their lives. For the literature review, in order to facilitate a fundamental comprehension of the notion of autonomy and autonomy support, I shall commence by citing esteemed scholars. Following this, a comprehensive examination of the literature pertaining to recent research in the aforementioned topic will be conducted, culminating in the presentation of critical views.

The Literature Review

Autonomy

The idea of autonomy has been extensively studied. The promotion of autonomy in educational settings can be expanded with a broader grasp of the concept among educators. Finer details are outlined in definitions by respected academics in this field, which improves our comprehension of the notion in educational contexts. The concept of autonomy has been connected to rationality, responsibility or an innate quality that emerges from the psychology of every human being.

The concept of autonomy pertains to the process of making choices that are informed by reason. Therefore, in order for autonomy to be cultivated as an educational objective, students must engage in the development of different forms of rationality and gain fundamental information. Indeed, the concept of reason has consistently been associated with the notions of freedom and autonomy. The human person is commonly regarded as a rational entity, capable of employing their cognitive faculties to comprehend their inherent nature, specifically their autonomy and authenticity (Jimenez Raya & Viera, 2015). Macaro (1997) defines autonomy in the sphere of responsibility arguing that it assumes control over one's own language

acquisition and the capacity to acknowledge the significance of assuming responsibility for one's own goals, content, advancement, methodology, and learning procedures. Additionally, individuals possess the capacity to assume responsibility for regulating the speed and cadence of knowledge acquisition, as well as assessing the progression of the educational journey.

Many studies on autonomy in learning begin by quoting Holec. His frequently cited definition of learner autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning… and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning…" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). In his description of the characteristics of the autonomous learner, Holec states that taking control of one's own learning comprises determining learning objectives and content, choosing learning materials, keeping track of learning progress, and self-evaluating learning.

Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira (2007, p. 1) define autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter) personal empowerment and social transformation". The intrinsic nature (competence) of autonomy as well as its social duty and critical awareness are highlighted as important components of autonomy in this definition. According to Ryan and Deci (2017) autonomy is not a way of acting or of controlling one's contexts. Autonomy is rather a state of drive that animates and guides such modes of behavior and environmental control. It is an innate, always-ready origin of inspiration that, when promoted by environmental factors, is completely capable of energizing students' pursuit of interests, interest-driven challenges, information assimilation, internalizations of will, and proactive pursuit of potential prospects for education. Because autonomy is understood as a psychological need, what the person needs is an experience that fulfills needs and, in doing so, encourages initiative, personal development, sound development, and well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Ryan and Deci (2017) remark that autonomy is associated with a psychological need to experience self-direction and personal approval to regulate one's own behavior. By regulating his or her behavior, the learner expresses his or her concerns and likes. The decisions of their actions are determined by him or herself according to their own needs and not by an external agent that directs them what to do.

What is relevant in this way of conceiving autonomy is the fact that it is an internal state of the person, a psychological need that arises from the interior of being. It is not the actions or behavior by themselves. It is an intrinsic motivational state that moves the individual to conduct themselves under self-directed principles and as a result generates feelings and experiences of satisfaction for doing actions and behaving autonomously. All these definitions emphasize the fact that the most important approaches for promoting learner autonomy are strongly related to rationally informed choices, the responsibility that students take for decisions and actions of their own learning or a psychological trait that is inherent in every human being. Nevertheless, it is absurd to neglect the environment while discussing autonomy as environmental autonomy support can become a scaffolding for the development in students of an autonomous personality for learning. The domain of autonomous learning in language learning has been deeply studied. Researchers throughout many latitudes have acquired knowledge through their scholarly investigation, so enhancing its comprehension and awareness. The findings have significant

implications that can have a favorable impact on teaching methodologies and educational policy across different linguistic and geographical settings.

Özer and Yükselir (2021) conducted a study on learner autonomy in Turkish language learning settings, identifying gaps and suggesting further research. The study analyzed 13 studies published since 2009 and used inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed three themes: characteristics of autonomous learners, ways to encourage autonomy, and challenges of developing autonomy. The study also highlighted a lack of qualitative research on late career teachers' experiences with autonomous language learning, which could help understand their mindset towards empowering students. Jamila and Zubairi (2022) found that research on learner autonomy in Bangladesh mainly focuses on the teaching of English, highlighting the need for more comprehensive empirical investigations and incorporating learners' reactions.

This study investigates students' involvement in autonomous learning and the obstacles and strategies associated with learner autonomy in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, particularly in challenging circumstances. It reveals that students often rely excessively on their teachers and suggest that teachers tend to provide excessive assistance and guidance throughout instructional activities. The study proposes strategies for promoting learner autonomy within instructional practices, which may be of significance to educators, curriculum developers, policymakers, and researchers involved in enhancing English language competency of learners in underserved and geographically isolated regions (Singh Negi & Laudari, 2022).

Dabiri et al. (2022) conducted a series of semi-structured interviews at Shiraz University of Applied Science and Technology, revealing both enabling and hindering elements to learner autonomy in EFL classes. The study suggests increased focus on the principles of learner autonomy and consideration of learners' needs and interests to create an engaging environment that encourages self-motivation and active contributions in the EFL educational setting. Upara and Chusanachoti (2023) investigated the methods employed by English teachers in Bangkok, Thailand to incorporate external learning materials and promote a teaching approach that fosters learner autonomy within the EFL setting. The study used a mixed-method approach, with participants being purposively selected English teachers. The results highlighted the tendency of teachers to heavily depend on resources that promote receptive learning, but also stressed the importance of proactive instructional methods and thorough assessments of educational materials. The study proposed a pedagogical guideline aimed at enhancing learner autonomy in out-of-class language learning, emphasizing learners' viewpoints, real-life applicability, and self-directed learning skills. These studies have made a substantial contribution to the field of autonomous learning by offering valuable insights into the attributes of autonomous learners, techniques for fostering learner autonomy, obstacles encountered in cultivating autonomy, and suggestions for enhancing autonomy in language learning environments.

Autonomy Support

As Reeve (2022) claims that autonomy support refers to the implementation of a student-centered approach and the cultivation of an empathetic interpersonal demeanor. A student focus implies that the environment is genuinely interested in the learner's opinions, choices, and objectives and is willing to adjust its offerings to suit the learner's preferences. An

understanding tone is an attempt to comprehend the requirements, preferences, and goals of the learner.

The principle of autonomy entails that a person in a position of power, such as an instructor, empathizes with and recognizes the emotions of another individual, such as a student. This person also offers relevant information and options for decision-making, while minimizing the utilization of coercion and requests. According to Black and Deci (2000) the principle of autonomy entails that a person in a position of power, such as an educator, empathetically considers the viewpoint of another individual, such as a student, recognizes their emotions, and offers them relevant information and options, while minimizing the utilization of coercion and requests.

Reeve (2016) suggests two primary objectives of autonomy support. At one level is to give students learning activities, a classroom atmosphere, and a student-teacher interaction that will support their everyday autonomy. In other words, the primary objective of teacher-provided autonomy support is to provide the curriculum in a way that specifically promotes students' independent motivation, and their satisfaction of their autonomy needs. On another level, the second objective of autonomy support, becoming in tune with one's students, is not immediately apparent. Teachers and their students achieve synchrony when they establish a dialectical relationship characterized by reciprocal influence, where the activities of one party impact the actions of the other, and vice versa. By introducing students to novel ways of engaging with the learning activity, teachers can encourage students to become more in tune with it. This will increase the likelihood that needs will be met, their interests will be aroused, and their goals will be advanced rather than neglected or declined (Reeve, 2016).

In the context of language learning, autonomy supportive environment has been defined as creating favorable conditions for language learners to take control of all or a portion of their language learning (Chinpakdee, 2020). Benson (2011) recommended a pedagogy for autonomy. It relates to methods that use discrete procedures known as pedagogical strategies for autonomy, which are meant to promote autonomy in a language classroom setting.

Numerous theoretically supported methods for encouraging learner autonomy in foreign language classes have been advocated (Benson, 2011; Dam, 2011; Ikonen, 2013; Alrabai, 2021). All of them strongly highlight that the most effective methods for fostering learner autonomy are those that give students more freedom and control over their education, raise their level of awareness and metacognition, and meet their personal learning objectives, needs, and emotions. It is well known that autonomy cannot be learned as if it were a concept or a definition to be taught or memorized. Autonomy, as mentioned earlier, is an intrinsic motivation that needs to be cultivated and fostered by the environment in which the student develops (Benson, 2011).

Numerous research studies have been conducted to examine the extent to which teachers provide autonomy support in their language with important implications for ways of teaching and educational initiatives in many linguistic and geographical contexts. Işık and Balçıkanlı (2020) explored the strategies used by eleven English as a Foreign Language teachers to promote learner autonomy and the challenges they face. The interviews were conducted at a state university in Turkey, and the results showed that teachers use various support mechanisms, including affective, resource, capacity, technological, and social, to support

student autonomy. However, they face limitations such as large class sizes, an overwhelming curriculum, and limited student enthusiasm. The study aims to provide insights into establishing a language learning environment that promotes autonomy and offers practical advice for educators teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Wijaya (2023) investigated the value of autonomy-supportive teaching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. It analyzed twenty contemporary literature sources and found that it significantly enhances learners' competence and self-reliance in acquiring the target language. The study recommends further implementation of this approach, as it has shown positive outcomes due to the extensive learning support provided by language teachers. The findings suggest several recommendations for the future progression of this qualitative investigation. Alrabai (2021) used classroom observations and student self-report to assess teachers' autonomy-supportive teaching practices. Results showed a significant improvement in EFL autonomy for the experimental group. The link between teacher autonomy-supportive teaching and learner autonomy was mediated by learner perceived choice, autonomy support, competence, and intrinsic motivation. The study suggests that students should have greater freedom in making choices, increased control over their learning, and increased participation in decision-making processes.

Autonomy supportive teaching has garnered substantial attention in educational psychology and pedagogy. By incorporating the latest research findings, we can enrich our study with up-to-date insights, potentially refining our methodologies and interventions. The implementation of autonomous language learning in foreign language education presents numerous advantages, enabling learners to actively participate in their language learning endeavors. Nevertheless, it is not devoid of its obstacles. One significant challenge involves facilitating students' ability to autonomously make well-informed judgments, which deviates from the conventional methods of professor-led instruction. One notable obstacle is the absence of appropriate autonomous learning exercises incorporated inside course materials. Overcoming these issues requires a departure from authoritarian pedagogical approaches, a transition that may face opposition due to deeply ingrained teacher-centered conventions (Avazmatova, 2022). Chong and Reinders (2022) underscore the significance of enhancing the conceptualization of learner autonomy through the integration of multiple theoretical frameworks, expanding the scope of study beyond the confines of the classroom, and applying a range of research approaches. This extension has the potential to expand our comprehension of autonomous language learning and provide valuable insights for the implementation of effective tactics. Moreover, the research conducted by Solihat et al. (2022) provides insights into the unique difficulties encountered within the educational landscape of Indonesia. Specifically, the shift from conventional teacher-centric pedagogy to self-directed learning poses a particularly formidable task. Although Indonesian students demonstrate a conceptual grasp of independent learning, the integration of this approach into their educational system presents significant challenges. Empirical evidence highlights the limited independence of autonomous learning implementation in high school environments, mostly due to the complex challenges encountered by educators and students alike.

The resolution of these obstacles and the development of a climate of autonomous learning demand collaborative endeavors that comprise theoretical progressions, customized

instructional methods, and focused support structures. By employing this approach, it is possible to fully utilize the capabilities of autonomous language learning in the context of foreign language education, hence facilitating learners' progress and success in their pursuit of language acquisition.

The Study

Literature suggests that autonomy is an innate, constantly available source of motivation, but when it is stimulated and promoted by environmental factors, it is fully capable of energizing students' pursuit of their own interests, interest-driven challenges, learning, volitional internalizations, and engagement with possible learning chances (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Additionally, the literature review provides theoretical underpinnings of autonomy and also explains several other conceptions associated with environmental supportive autonomy. Clarification of what all these means and pointing out underlying features could result in a deeper understanding of learner autonomy, and the role that supportive autonomy performs in the search to encourage and foster traits, and actions aimed at the development of autonomy.

Therefore, this study addresses the problem of discovering what attributes of autonomous learning and autonomy support were observed and described during the English learning process of the secondary school pupils who volunteered to take the free English course. The results of this search can shed light on the relevance of autonomy support in the context of language teaching and learning. Taking as reference the setting in which the study was conducted.

Research Questions

The aim of this study resulted in the formulation of the research questions given below, which formed a guide to the study.

RQ1: What features of environmental autonomy support were observed during the English lessons?

RQ2: What aspects of autonomy were identified in the lower secondary school pupils' English learning process?

The questions above aim to explore the research perception of the environment supporting and encouraging autonomous behavior. Though as a small, bounded qualitative study, the aim of the research is not to generalize or make claims beyond this setting, it may stimulate similar research into her contexts and add substantially to the discussion of what attributes of autonomy support can be characterized during the English learning process.

Research Design

The primary goals of this study are to systematically observe and document the specific attributes of environmental autonomy support inside a secondary school located in the western area of Mexico. Additionally, the study aims to identify and analyze the many aspects of autonomy demonstrated by students who are learning English. This study puts forward two main assumptions. The first suggests that the learning environment has a major impact on the level of autonomy displayed by secondary school students. The second proposes that the

implementation of autonomous learning strategies fosters an increased level of autonomy among students.

Qualitative research methods such as case studies are widely used in social and applied research for a variety of reasons. Case studies aim to create comprehensive understandings at a more strategic level by fostering rapport and trust. Their goal is truthfulness and an understanding that is richer and deeper than is typically feasible in large-scale survey research (O'Leary, 2004). The group of qualities and the progression of occurrences of this case, as well as the achievement of a deeper understanding or perspective of autonomous learning are the key drivers underlying this study which aims to enhance knowledge of autonomous learning, within a real-life context, by examining the phenomenon in a natural environment from the perspective of two teacher trainees (Rebolj, 2013; Stake, 1995). The study will involve the intentional selection of twelve secondary school pupils, aged 12 to 14, who meet particular inclusion requirements. These criteria include enrollment in a non-required 40-hour course that utilizes autonomous learning methodologies. The exclusion criteria will include students who are not currently enrolled in the specified course and anyone who decline to give their consent for participation. The research team was integrated by a researcher and two senior undergraduates, teacher trainees. The main responsibility of the researcher consisted of project management; whilst the teacher trainees had two main responsibilities. On the one hand, the design and implementation of the English course, and on the other, keeping a research journal. In both activities they were assisted and monitored by a teacher trainer and the researcher.

The data gathering procedure will involve the diligent upkeep of a thorough research journal, which will document the entirety of the process and provide insights into the realm of autonomous learning and the students' reactions to the educational setting (Creswell, 2013; Cobin &Straus, 2015). The inclusion of direct observations throughout the 40-hour course will enhance the comprehensiveness of the research journal, so facilitating a more profound qualitative comprehension. The forthcoming qualitative analysis will entail the utilization of thematic analysis, employing a coding framework to discern patterns and topics pertaining to environmental autonomy support and autonomy facets. The utilization of the Atlas.ti software served as a valuable tool for the efficient management and organization of qualitative data, hence helping the production of significant insights and patterns. The analysis of the findings resulted in a final version of 9 codes: emotional climate, learning environment, motivation, awareness, choice, learner inside de classroom, learners outside the classroom, teacher support and metacognition. In adherence to ethical principles, the researchers will obtain informed consent from both the pupils and their parents. Stringent confidentiality protocols will be diligently enforced to protect the names and sensitive information of the participants. These procedures encompass anonymous data reporting and the secure storage of data.

Results

The analysis of the journals highlighted the language learning context and its propensity to promote autonomous learning as well as an autonomy supportive environment. The results are presented in answer to the study questions using journal extracts in the form of paragraphs. They emphasize unique and important narratives from the journals.

Beginning with a Dependent Mentality

In the discourse of the journals, particularly those of the initial sessions, the response of the pupils to the class instructions, activities, and assignments proposed by the teacher trainees shines out as an observable aspect. The journals describe inactive, passive replies. As the entry below affirms:

> *The study reveals that students lack a clear study plan and goal for English, and do not use any tools to learn on their own. They also fail to establish study goals and wait for guidance from teachers, all the time. They have not yet consciously decided their goal and require teacher support. They have not developed independent work or Personal Language Improvement (PLI) strategies and leaving a portion of the class to do assignments independently is challenging for nearly half of the class. (*Extracted from the research journals of sessions one and two).

The content of the journals regarding the passive and ostensibly inactive response of the pupils during the first-class sessions may be classified as typical. In the first few sessions, it was not anticipated that pupils would respond immediately with autonomous language learning behavior. In contrast, it is understandable that their behavior is dependent on the teacher and that they display little or no indications of autonomy. As a result of the educational environment in which they are immersed. It is highly likely that the secondary school they attend does not incorporate autonomous learning into its instructional strategies. Their approach is more inclined to focus on the teacher.

As time and sessions progressed, so did journal discourse. A more positive discourse involving the responses of the pupils to the proposal of the teacher trainees. This is evident in the sections that follow, which describe the environmental autonomy support aspects seen in English lessons.

Environmental Autonomy Support Features Observed during English Classes

Environmental autonomy support is the construction of a learning environment that encourages learners' autonomy and personal preference. The intervention of the teacher fosters a favorable learning environment as well as a balanced emotional climate, making their role crucial for fostering an autonomous environment.

Teacher Support as the Provision of Conditions for Language Pupils

The information revealed in the journals regarding teacher support sheds great light on the journey of the pupils on the path towards autonomy. The journals reveal a sequence of concepts that demonstrate the significance of teaching in the education of students and how a teaching process based on professional literature, good preparation, and teacher training accompanied by an expert can affect the decisions and actions of students. The following extracts from the journals better illustrate the points presented above.

> *The intervention focused on providing students with guidance and resources for autonomous learning. It included activities, independent work, and the freedom to choose*

activities. Two students reported using reading books to enrich their vocabulary and second language learning. The intervention also included various exercises for independent study. The goal was to persuade students that using the resources and tools offered is directly tied to autonomous learning. The intervention was limited to providing guidance. (Extracted from the research journals of sessions three and four).

The primary objective of the teaching approach was to enhance students' capacity for autonomous learning through the provision of well-organized instruction and a diverse range of materials. The primary objective was to foster autonomy in learning by promoting student agency in their educational endeavors. The instruction encompassed a range of activities, including various tasks, independent study, and the opportunity for students to select their preferred learning activities. This approach aimed to foster a sense of ownership and accountability among the students. The efficacy of the course of action in improving vocabulary and second language learning through the utilization of books was underscored by two students. The lesson plan additionally incorporated self-paced exercises for individual study, thereby emphasizing the significance of autonomy in learning. The intervention placed a strong emphasis on promoting self-determination and individual choice within the context of the learning process, as opposed to imposing a predetermined learning path.

The Learning Environment Fosters the Development of Autonomy
The learning environment appeared as a crucial element in the fostering of autonomy from the analysis of the journals. It is acknowledged that the environment plays a preponderant role in every learning process and could determine its success or failure. The journal evidence provided below confirms this argument.

The students' grammar comprehension was dynamic and active, involving word searches and collaborative methods. Their success was attributed to teamwork, understanding, and explaining concepts. Exercises allowing students to explain problems themselves have been successful. The use of PLI strategies was evident. Music was used as a teaching tool for some activities, and the classroom dynamics were enjoyable for the students. Overall, the students found the classroom dynamic engaging and less boring. (Extracted from the research journals of sessions four and five).

According to the accounts of the teacher trainees, the learning environment encouraged classroom attitudes and behaviors that could be associated with autonomous learning. For instance, the fact that a strategy like the PLI has been designed for students to organize the completion of independent work activities, or study in pairs or groups. This could indicate that the learning environment is essential for fostering and encouraging autonomy.

Emotional Climate Encourages the Growth of Autonomy
While reading the journals, another relevant feature of environmental autonomy support was noticed: the emotional climate. The conditions and situations created by the teacher trainees to encourage independent behavior and carrying out activities of an autonomous nature are crucial

for fostering an ideal emotional climate. The journal evidence that is included below validates the above assertion.

> *Students have the freedom to choose activities during their PLI work, and they enjoy working in pairs and swapping pairs. Interaction and participation have improved, making them feel more integrated and comfortable. They enjoy class dynamics, working in pairs to better understand each other. Autonomous learning development is evident as students work together to explain issues. Different dynamic classes are enjoyed, and strategies for understanding topic grammar are dynamic and team oriented. Students are motivated and more interested in working than just listening, making the learning process functional. (*Extracted from the research journals of sessions six and seven).

These assertions emphasize and validate the importance of the emotional climate to the learning process, particularly in this instance, to the promotion of autonomous learning. The responses of the students demonstrate attitudes that could be read as approval, learning, and enjoyment of the class activities, in contrast to the passive demeanor they exhibited during the initial sessions of the course. Statements such as "they have the freedom to choose" and "they use strategies such as PLI" demonstrate that the environment is conducive to autonomous learning. In addition, several statements related to working styles, such as "they enjoy the activities, and they prefer to work in pairs or teams", indicate that the self-confidence of the pupils has increased.

Identified Features of Autonomous Learning of the Pupils
Autonomous learners exhibit certain features that characterize their behavior, attitudes, and strategies towards independent learning.

Choosing their Own Learning Path
As the course progressed, the journal entries gradually revealed the autonomous learning practices and attitudes of the students. One of the distinct features that emerged while reading the journals was that they gained confidence in their decisions and their capacity to determine which activities, resources, and strategies were most beneficial to their learning. The following evidence supports this statement:

> *Most students are actively engaging in activities to enhance their language learning. They have started choosing activities during class, and for the first time, they want to do all of them voluntarily. More students are learning alone or through specific activities. Students are more likely to choose activities that apply their knowledge more readily. They have become more accustomed to choosing their own activities and are more likely to choose exercises to complete alone or in class. Most students have established what to do to develop their Personal Language Improvement (PLI). Students choose activities based on their preferences and learning style. (*Extracted from the research journals of eight and nine).

The text emphasizes the proactive engagement of students in the process of language acquisition, as they shift from a passive role to an active one, actively participating in a range of activities during their sessions. The aforementioned passion is demonstrated through their eagerness to participate in all accessible activities for the initial occasion. The trend towards self-directed learning is apparent, as students are increasingly opting for activities that enable them to apply their information in a more efficient manner. The provision of autonomy enables students to make informed decisions when choosing exercises to undertake, whether individually or as part of the collective classroom setting. Consequently, individualized solutions are developed to enhance individuals' PLI. The selection of activities by students is influenced by their own preferences and learning styles, indicating a purposeful and mindful approach to their language acquisition process. The student body is actively designing their language learning experience by embracing autonomy, employing tailored tactics, and demonstrating a great awareness of optimizing their language progress efforts.

Motivation as a Key Factor for Autonomy

The findings may be regarded as interest and enthusiasm of students for English-language study. It could be observed a desire to study and build skills for individual fulfillment or development. The following evidence supports this claim:

> *Most students are actively engaging in language learning activities, with many actively seeking to improve vocabulary. They can work together or alone to learn the subject, and they have shown increased confidence in understanding and using the themes. In recent weeks, most students have used extra learning tools to enhance their English language learning. Overall, students are actively participating in language learning activities and utilizing resources to enhance their learning experience. (*Extracted from the research journals of sessions nine and ten*).

The excerpt emphasizes an energetic and lively setting where students actively participate in language learning exercises, displaying a keen interest in improving their vocabulary. Students engage in both collaborative group work and independent study in order to achieve mastery of the subject area. The increasing self-assurance in their ability to understand and utilize diverse themes demonstrates a favorable progression in their language acquisition process. A noteworthy development is the proactive use of supplementary educational resources by students in recent weeks, highlighting their dedication to enhancing their English language competence. The adoption of a proactive strategy enhances individuals' overall engagement in language learning activities and their efficient usage of resources, hence enhancing their learning experience.

Understanding of the Learning Process

One can remark that motivation develops awareness, and in turn, awareness may develop intrinsic motivation in students. This could cause that pupils increase their learning experience and accomplish their objectives more effectively. The following statements suggest that students were conscious of the learning process.

The students are already familiar with applying their learning through games and independent work at home. Two sessions have discussed resources and strategies to increase vocabulary. They are presented with options and decide which to do. They already know how to apply Personal Language Improvement due to previous instructions. (Extracted from the research journals of sessions ten and eleven).

The passage provides insight into a group of students who already had prior knowledge and experience in incorporating their educational pursuits into interactive gaming and self-directed study inside the confines of their own homes. The students have participated in two sessions that have explored resources and practices with the objective of enhancing their vocabulary. The noteworthy aspect of this educational approach is its focus on student-centeredness, wherein students are provided with choices and granted the authority to make judgments on the activities they wish to engage in. This method prioritizes the individual's liberty and fosters a sense of ownership in their educational trajectory. Furthermore, the students have exhibited proficiency in the application of the Personal Language Improvement concept, hence showcasing their aptitude in efficiently implementing prior teachings.

Discussion

Prior to enrolling in the free English lessons, the educational background of the pupils and their experience in learning English could be typified by a teacher-centered approach rather than one that emphasized learner autonomy. In addition, they had never received instruction in the use of strategies that facilitate the development of autonomous learning. This could explain their initial passivity and their lack of initiative regarding their own education. In these circumstances, and for the purpose of fostering the development of autonomous traits and activities, the role of the teacher is crucial. As indicated previously, the English course was planned and implemented by two senior undergraduates, teacher trainees, assisted and supervised by a teacher trainer. For the aims of the study, the decision to integrate the undergraduates was decisive for the following reasons. First, they reside in the same village as the pupils, they are intimately familiar with the social context. Even their secondary education was completed at the same institution as them. This affords them an unmatched understanding and comprehension of the local context. Second, they were initially interested in participating in the endeavor. Their primary objective was to acquire knowledge and teaching experience. They are in their fourth year of college, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English Language Teaching. They had already completed BA courses in topics such as theories, approaches, and language teaching methods, as well as a complete year in teaching practice. Although they lack teaching experience, they are not unfamiliar with the subject matter. Fourth, they were assisted and monitored throughout the entire course by an experienced teacher trainer.

Due to the aforementioned factors, the teacher trainees readily adopted a student focus approach. A student focus implies that the environment is authentically interested in the learner's opinions, preferences, and goals and is willing to adapt its offerings accordingly (Reeve, 2022). As evidenced by the results, teachers are crucial to achieving an autonomous learning environment because they entail the creation of a learning environment that nurtures a sense of ownership and responsibility and encourages students to take charge of their learning

journey. A teacher who promotes autonomy views students as active, motivated, and competent partners in the learning process (Alrabai, 2021). The environment of trust fostered by the teacher trainees led to a change in the decisions and in the traits of the pupils, creating favorable conditions for language learners to take control of all or a portion of their language learning (Chinpakdee, 2020). Not only was the autonomy-supportive environment fostered by providing a curriculum that specifically promotes independent motivation and the satisfaction of students' autonomy requirements, but also by becoming in tune with one's pupils (Reeve, 2016). The results indicate that the teacher trainees fostered a climate of trust in which students felt empowered to make independent decisions in an atmosphere of freedom and pleasure.

As stated previously, supplying students with learning activities, a classroom environment, and student-teacher interaction foster their daily autonomy. The narrative emerging from the journals after the beginning of the course demonstrated that this was the case. The analysis of the data made the shift in attitude, behavior, and actions that the pupils undertook on their own. Initially, some of them decided to assume greater responsibility for their actions. Additionally, their activities and responsibilities were limited. As time progressed, new tasks, decisions, and students who accepted the challenge of autonomous learning were introduced. These findings are consistent with the frequently cited definition of learner autonomy by Holec, which states that autonomous learning is the capacity to assume control over one's own educational process... and to assume the responsibility for all the decisions pertaining to every facet of this learning process (Holec, 1981). Also, Macaro (1997) defines autonomy in the sphere of responsibility. Contending that autonomy is the capacity to take command of one's own language learning and to recognize the importance of taking responsibility for one's own objectives, content, progress, method, and techniques of learning. Additionally, it is the capacity to control the tempo and rhythm of learning and the evaluation of the learning process.

The findings showed that the students gradually developed a sense of responsibility when making decisions regarding the content of the course, activities, and instructional strategies. This could indicate that the environmental conditions instilled in them, on the one hand, the confidence to make decisions and, on the other, the knowledge and experience that aid in determining what is most expedient and promotes learning. Regarding motivation, it is understood as a consequence or reaction to three observed elements: one, an environment that encourages autonomy, two, the awareness of the learners that they have options to choose based on their preferences, tastes, and needs. Finally, the results of their decisions in turn fed their state of drive. This could be translated as autonomy, in response to the definition of Ryan and Deci (2017) which suggests that autonomy is an innate, always-ready origin of inspiration that, when promoted by environmental factors, is completely capable of energizing students' pursuit of interests, interest-driven challenges, information assimilation, internalizations of will, and proactive pursuit of potential prospects for education.

The conception that Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007), Ryan and Deci (2017), and Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) have on autonomy, in the sense that it is an internal state of the person, a psychological need that arises from the interior of being, an intrinsic motivational state that moves the individual to conduct themselves under self-directed principles, has little connection to what occurred in the classroom, with the group of English course pupils. Their internal state lacked autonomy; rather, their responses corresponded (especially in the initial

sessions) with anti-autonomy features. Consequently, autonomy in learning is a collection of diverse factors that come together to develop and execute a course of action based on knowledge, experience, will, and interest that fosters a positive learning environment, providing students with learning options, relating learning to their interests and real-world situations, and recognizing and rewarding their progress and accomplishments.

The research exhibits robust internal validity due to its reliance on a case study methodology and the utilization of data obtained from journals. This approach enables the acquisition of comprehensive and intricate understandings related to the issue under investigation. The utilization of Atlas.ti software for data analysis might additionally enhance internal validity by facilitating systematic and objective investigation of the data. There is a notable worry, however, as the scope of this study is confined to a solitary state educational institution situated in the western area of Mexico and encompasses a just twelve secondary school students. The generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations may be limited. The implications of the findings are relevant for educators and policymakers, as they indicate the significance of establishing a conducive atmosphere that promotes autonomous learning behavior and offering scaffolding measures to assist students in their autonomous learning progress. However, the utilization of a case study methodology, although yielding comprehensive data, may impose constraints on the generalizability of findings pertaining to the provision of autonomy support within educational settings. It is imperative to take into account potential biases that may arise during the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Conclusion

Needless to say, that autonomy conveys benefits for the student. For instance, increasing its efficacy in both the present and the future, learning should be more targeted and purposeful. Some of the barriers between learning and living that arise as a consequence of teacher-centered instruction should not occur. The ability to act independently could be transferred to other aspects of daily life, thereby making students more valuable members of society and more effective participants in the democratic process. It is critical to understand that autonomy may not always come naturally, however, and some students may need more encouragement and support to develop it. As educators, we can help to nurture autonomy in our students by providing them with ample opportunities to explore their interests, strengths, and passions, and by encouraging them to take ownership of their learning journey. The study casts light on the importance of both fostering an environment and employing strategies that facilitate learners' gradual development of autonomy. In addition, it was demonstrated that well-coordinated work involving adequate instruction preparation and theoretical and practical knowledge of learner autonomy enables both individuals and groups to move closer to achieving their objectives. Consequently, this study enabled us to comprehend that autonomy is a path to be walked rather than a person's natural state. The aforementioned study offers significant contributions in understanding the concepts of autonomy support and autonomous learning within a particular educational setting. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations associated with this research, including a limited sample size and potential challenges in generalizing the findings to broader contexts. The study's value rests in its addition to the theoretical and

practical knowledge of autonomy support in the field of education. However, it is important to exercise caution when generalizing the findings to different situations.

ORCID

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5274-5838

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

Rights and Permissions

Open Access

References

Allwright, R. L. (1988). Autonomy and individualization in whole-class instruction. In A. Brookes & P. Grundy (Eds.), *Individualization and autonomy in language learning (pp.35-44)*. Modern English Publications and the British Council.

Alrabai, F. (2021). The influence of autonomy-supportive teaching on EFL students' classroom autonomy: An experimental intervention. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 728657. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.728657

Avazmatova, M. (2022). The role of learner autonomy in foreign language learning. *Humanising Language Teaching*, *24*(4), 1-6.

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Longman.

Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, *40*(1), 21-40. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003958

Benson, P. (2011) *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (2nd ed). Pearson Education.

Black, A. E., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The effects of instructors' autonomy support and students' autonomous motivation on learning organic chemistry: A self-determination theory perspective. *Science Education*, *84(6)*, 740-756.

Chinpakdee, M. (2020). *Developing learner autonomy in language learning: A study in the Thai EFL secondary school context*. [Doctoral thesis]. New Zealand: Victoria University of Wellington.

Chong, S. W., & Reinders, H. (2022). Autonomy of English language learners: A scoping review of research and practice. *Language Teaching Research, 0*(0), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221075812

Cobin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Dabiri, A., Kashefian-Naeeini, S., Hosseini, S. A & Mustapha, R. (2002). Developing learner autonomy in EFL academic classes. *Social Science Journal*, *12* (3) 3907-3922.

Dam, L. (2011). Developing learner autonomy with school kids: Principles, practices, results. In D. Gardner (Ed.), *Fostering autonomy in language learning (pp. 40-51)*. Zirve University

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Pergamon. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614511359

Ikonen, A. (2013). *Promotion of learner autonomy in the EFL classroom: the students' view.* [Master´s thesis]. University of Jyväskylä Department of Languages English.

Jamila, M. & Zubairi, A. M. (2022). A systematic review of autonomous learning in ESL/EFL in Bangladesh: A road to discovery era (2009-2022). *English Language Teaching, 15* (4), 47-66. https://doi: 10.5539/elt.v15n4p47

Jimenez Raya, M., & Vieira, F. (2015). *Enhancing autonomy in language education: A case-based approach to teacher and learner development.* De Gruyter Mouton.

Jiménez Raya, M., Lamb, T. and Vieira, F. (2007). *Pedagogy for autonomy in language education in Europe: Towards a framework for learner and teacher development.* Dublin Authentik.

Macaro, E. (1997). *Target language, collaborative learning and autonomy* (Vol. 5). Multilingual Matters.

Işık, T. & Balçıkanlı, C. (2020). EFL teachers' autonomy supportive practices for out-of-class language learning. *IAFOR Journal of Education: Studies in Education*, *8* (4), 63-78. https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.8.4.04

O'Leary, Z. (2004). *The essential guide to doing research.* Sage publications.

Özer, Ö., & Yükselir, C. (2021). *Learner autonomy in the Turkish EFL context: a meta-synthesis study of 2009-2019 qualitative research* [Conference paper]. International Language Teacher Education Research Group (ILTERG2) Conference held on 16/17 October 2020 in an online platform.

Rebolj, B. (2013). The case study as a type of qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Education Studies, 1*, 28-43.

Reeve, J. (2016). Autonomy-supportive teaching: What it is, how to do it. In: Liu, W., Wang, J., Ryan, R. (eds) *Building Autonomous Learners (pp. 129-152).* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-630-0_7

Reeve, J. (2022). What it means to 'take ownership over one's own learning' in a self-determination theory analysis. In J. Mynard & S. Shelton-Strong (Ed.), *Autonomy support beyond the language learning classroom: A self-determination theory perspective (pp. 31-44).* Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788929059-005

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.* The Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806

Blanco, C. (2005). Sandín Esteban, Mª Paz (2003) "Investigación cualitativa en educación. fundamentos y tradiciones". Madrid. Mc Graw and Hill Interamericana de España (pp.258). *Revista de Pedagogía, 26*(77), 48-58.

Singh Negi, J., & Laudari, S. (2022). Challenges of developing learner autonomy of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in underprivileged areas. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 7(2), 65-80. https://doi.org/10.52547/ijree.7.2.65

Solihat, D., Asikin, N. A., Thamrin, N. R., Fadhly, F. Z., & Febriyanthi, S. (2022, December). *The Implementation of Autonomous Learning in English Language Teaching (ELT)* [Paper presentation]. The 2nd Universitas Kuningan International Conference on System, Engineering, and Technology, Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia. https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.2-12-2021.2320223

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Sage.

Upara, S., & Chusanachoti, R. (2023). From real world to classroom: Navigating English language learning through autonomy-supportive instruction and out-of-class resources in Thai EFL context. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network, 16*(2), 572–587.

Vansteenkiste, M., Ryan, R. M., & Soenens, B. (2020). Basic psychological need theory: Advancements, critical themes, and future directions. *Motivation and Emotion*, *44*, 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-019-098181

Wijaya, K. (2023). The role of autonomy-supportive teaching method in EFL learning contexts worldwide. *SAGA: Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 4*(2), 127–136. https://doi.org/10.21460/saga.2023.42.140