Exploring the students' perceptions and language learning experiences of a self-access centre

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Abstract

Self-access language learning (SALL) refers to the learning that typically takes place in a self-access centre (SAC), whether self or other-directed. As an innovation in the foreign language teaching-learning milieu, it has been diffused and adopted all over the world. The present case study aims to investigate EFL students' perceptions and experiences regarding this learning mode (called autonomous at this university) and the facility where it takes place (SAC). From a qualitative perspective, I gathered data through interviews, observation and analysis of students' work reports, resulting in the two broad themes underpinning this study. The results include ten findings supported by evidence taken from the data; four are classified as "Students' perceptions of the autonomous learning mode, and six as "Students' experiences within the autonomous learning mode". Finally, suggestions for a more contextualized and critical adoption of innovations in this arena are provided.

Explorando las percepciones estudiantiles y sus experiencias de aprendizaje de lenguas en un Centro de Autoacceso

Resumen

El aprendizaje de idiomas, auto dirigido o dirigido por otro, en un Centro de Autoacceso (CAA), como muchas innovaciones en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, ha sido difundido y adoptado al rededor del mundo. Este estudio de caso investiga las percepciones y experiencias de estudiantes en esta modalidad de aprendizaje (llamada autónoma en esta universidad) y en el espacio en el que se desarrolla (CAA). Desde una perspectiva cualitativa, a través de entrevistas, observaciones y análisis de bitácoras de estudiantes, se colectaron los datos de los que emergieron dos temas que sostienen este estudio. Diez hallazgos, cuatro pertenecientes al tema "Percepciones de los estudiantes acerca de la modalidad de aprendizaje autónomo" y seis al tema "Experiencias de los estudiantes en la modalidad de aprendizaje autónomo" son respaldados por evidencias tomadas de los datos. Finalmente, se dan sugerencias para una adopción crítica y contextualizada de innovaciones en esta disciplina.

Introduction

L earner autonomy has been the foundational topic for the promotion and implementation, around the world, of self-instruction and/or self-direction as modes of learning foreign languages, and Self-Access Centres (SAC) has been a resource for achieving this kind of learning. Mexico, as part of this globalized world, has invested a great amount of time and money establishing several self-access centres all over the country, mostly at state-funded public universities, such as the University of Veracruz (UV).

While working as a counsellor at the Self-Access Centre-Veracruz, at the University of Veracruz, my constant contact with students who try to learn English as a foreign language (EFL), through self-instruction, led me to reflect on several issues which became the research questions that I endeavoured to answer through the current study:

Research Questions:

1. Are the new 'autonomous courses' (based on principles of self-direction and SALL) functioning according to what the university intends to?
2. How do students studying EFL perceive the self-instruction mode?
3. What are the students' experiences within this innovation: the self-instruction mode of learning English and the use of the Self-Access Centre?

The following section summarizes the context in which this research was carried out. Subsequently, I proceed to explain core concepts related to self-access language learning, in which through the use of self-access centres, autonomous learning is supposed to be promoted. The methodologies I drew on for collecting and analyzing data, both derived from the qualitative perspective of this study, are illustrated. Next, based on the findings, separated in the two themes that emerged, I was able to answer the research questions that guided the study. In the last section, I point out the implications of the outcomes in the local context, as well as in the wider context of the EFL's world, and I finally present the conclusions I reached.

Context of the study

The current research was carried out at the Language Centre-Veracruz (in Veracruz City), specifically in its Self-Access Centre (SAC) at the University of Veracruz (UV), the public university in the state of Veracruz.

Today, the University of Veracruz has a student population of approximately 63 thousand pupils distributed throughout the five campuses (Universidad Veracruzana, 2015a). Some of them come from small towns or villages around the city where their campus is located; and most of them come from middle-class or working-class families. The academic staff makes up a total of 5 470 people. The administrative staff numbers 6585 people (Universidad Veracruzana, 2015b). At the Language Centre-Veracruz, the number of students is around 2.5 thousand, and the staff makes up a total of 45 language teachers and 10 administrative employees (Universidad Veracruzana, 2015c). From these 45 teachers, 4 work as counsellors, 2 as assistants and 1 as a technician at each of the two SACs: the SAC in the Language Centre and the SAC in the USBI (for its name in Spanish: *Unidad de Servicios Bibliotecarios y de Informática*).

The University of Veracruz, through its Language Centres (campuses: Xalapa, Orizaba/Córdoba, Veracruz, Poza Rica/Tuxpan and Coatzacoalcos/Minatitlan), offers English and French courses, as well as courses of other foreign languages such as Italian, German, Chinese and Japanese in certain centres. As part of a National Project, five Self-Access Centres were opened in 1999, and at present there are eleven SACs distributed throughout the state of Veracruz. They were all created sharing the same theoretical foundations and aims. They all have very similar physical structures and facilities (furniture, electronic devices, working areas), but they may have different materials, classification of materials, organization and even a different approach to counselling students. Additionally, they have evolved in diverse directions and at different paces.

While these SACs are sometimes used as practice centres by people—both students and non students at the university ('external students')—studying a foreign language at the Language Centres, they are mostly used as learning centres by students who are studying English 1 and 2 (compulsory subjects in all undergraduate programs) in what is called 'autonomous' courses. In these courses, most students work by themselves at the SAC, not because they want to, but because they do not have any other choice: either there is no place for them in a regular class, or attending the SAC is a compulsory part of their course.

Theoretical Framework

Autonomy and autonomous learning

Considering a general meaning of this term as the condition of something that does not depend on anything else, autonomy can be understood as the counter-edge, the opposite point of a learning

continuum: conventional-dependent → unconventional-independent. The history of the term, in the field of education and language learning, can be dated back to the post-WWII period, when social rights movements arose and education was first considered as an empowering tool, leading to the awareness of its value. Collins and Hammond confirm the latter by saying that "…the ultimate purpose of education is the betterment of society, and that critical awareness and social action to promote emancipation are desirable results of any educational intervention" (1991, p. 13).

Another example of the origins of Distance Education dates back to 1939, when a public institution, the National Centre for Distance Education (CNED for its name in French: *Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance*) was created under the supervision of the Department of Education in France. Its purpose was to mitigate the lack of organization of the teaching system during the WWII, by providing a teaching service through the postal system, hence its name, *Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondence*' (CNEPC). In 1953, it became the *Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondence, Radio et Télévision* (CNEP-CRT), and provided schooling to sick children, prisoners and deportees. Later, in 1996, taking advantage of the internet, it became an open platform accessible for distance education. Today, it offers 3000 programs from kindergarten to university, and it is the first distance education operator in Europe (CNED, 2016).

Regarding adult education, from the 1970s on, there have been several innovations. Some of them, especially in France, were based on issues such as social awareness and resulted in the insistence of "the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives" (Holec, 1981, p.1). Some others, like Candy (1998), based on pedagogical issues, maintain that "…adults demonstrably learn more, and more effectively, when they are consulted about dimensions such as the pace, sequence, mode of instruction and even the content of what they are studying" (p. 75). Based on these ideas, the concept of autonomous learning was developed, as shown in the following paragraphs.

In foreign language education, learner autonomy became, as Little (1991) expresses, the new "buzz-word" which has transformed old practices in the language classroom and has given rise to self-access facilities around the world. This is one of the most popular definitions; according to Henri Holec (1981), autonomy is an acquired ability to take charge of one's own learning. That is to say,

…to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, ie: determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting

methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure
of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc);
evaluating what has been acquired. (p. 3)

Dickinson (1987) also describes autonomy as "…a situation
in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions
concerned with his (or her) learning and the implementation of
those decisions" (p. 18). Critical reflection and psychological el-
ements are added by Little (1991), who, still using the idea of
capacity, states that "…autonomy is a capacity—for detachment,
critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It
presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a par-
ticular kind of psychological relation to the process and content
of his learning" (p. 4). In the same vein, Nunan (1995) suggests
that learners who are able to define their own goals and to cre-
ate their own learning opportunities have become autonomous.
However, I prefer to consider Sionis' (1990) description of reach-
ing autonomy as a complex process that includes the identifica-
tion of our own needs, the self-determination of goals and the
election and execution of the most suitable learning method as
well as a self-evaluation procedure.

Among the diverse conceptualizations of autonomy that have
arisen in the ELT milieu, Benson (1997) describes it as the ac-
knowledgement of the rights of learners within educational
systems, considering the fact that "the self-directed learner may
choose classroom instruction" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11). This
position is also consistent with Pennycook's claim (1997) that
there might be students "who independently [choose] to come
to a teacher to learn and would prefer that teacher to teach in
a 'teacherly' way." (p. 43). Both statements sound fair, but I find
them rather far from the reality in the educational setting where I
carried out this research.

In the SAC at the Language Centre Veracruz, some students
have no option but to take their English course(s) in the (incon-
gruously called) 'autonomous mode'. However, I still think that
even in this case, students may be able to reach, or rather, exer-
cise some degree of autonomy, understood as Boud and Cotterall
describe it. On the one hand, Boud (1988) asserts that "[t]he main
characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that stu-
dents take some significant responsibility for their own learning
over and above responding to instruction" (p. 23); while Cotterall
(2003) recognizes that in several contexts many opportunities are
given for "the learners to assume control of some of the deci-
sions surrounding their learning" (p. 1). However, it is important
to take into consideration that students cannot be expected to
suddenly adopt an autonomous attitude, but need to be guided
towards the goal of gaining control of their own learning (John-
son & Morikawa, 2011).

It is clear that through the last 20 years, the ideas of autonomy and independence, in the fields of applied linguistics and language learning, have had different definitions depending on the perspectives underlying them. Thus, within educational arenas, the description of autonomy has developed from a capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), to a desirable individual goal due to philosophical, pedagogical and practical reasons (Cotterall, 1995, p. 219), and then, to a transformative path towards social autonomy (Benson, 1996). More recently, Borg and Busaidi (2012), who found that there is a link between motivation and the level of autonomy the learners show, have added that developing autonomy when learning a foreign language requires conscious awareness of the learning process, which could be achieved through conscious reflection and decision-making.

Self-access Centres and SALL (self-access language learning)

In general, the term self-access refers to the organization of learning materials and equipment to make them available and accessible to students without necessarily having a teacher there. In Sturtridge's words (1992), the term self-access centre refers to the "system which makes materials available to language learners so that they can choose to work as they wish, usually without a teacher or with very limited teacher support" (p. 4).

Looking at the background of self-access centres, it can be said that their predecessors are the language laboratories that responded to a behaviouristic, lock-step approach to language learning. However, even though they recognize their differences, Gremmo and Riley (1995) would rather compare SACs to libraries, since these were a basic manifestation of autonomous and self-directed learning.

Several authors talk about self-access centres in a similar way, as the space in which specially designed, adapted or processed materials can be used by learners in such a way that they can direct and assess their own learning with or without help (Sheerin 1989; Booton & Benson 1996; McCafferty undated; Dickinson 1993). Others perceive the potential of self-access as a motor for change for students as well as for teachers to move towards independence. Nevertheless, Barnet and Jordan (1991) point out that "self-access can never be the only way to learn; it is one way—but it is a way which can encompass many ways, and therein lies its greatest strength" (p. 312).

The physical environment, materials and approach of different SACs may vary enormously, although the ones constructed and established at the University of Veracruz may share the same approach, plan and organization, but not necessarily the same materials or size of buildings. The implementation of a SAC depends

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basically on "the beliefs about learning which are held by those who set up the system" (Sturtridge, 1992, p. 4). Therefore, depending on this ideology, the needs perceived and the teaching situation to which it is related, a SAC may function as an instruction centre; as a practice centre; as a skill centre or as a learning centre; all of them sharing the characteristic of fostering autonomy and the skills of self-directed learning (Booton & Benson, 1996).

Derived from self–access centres, as mentioned at the beginning of this document, the term self-access language learning (SALL) stands for the kind of learning that takes place precisely in a SAC. In this respect Sheerin (1989) says that "[t]he essential prerequisite to self-access learning is the provision of self-access materials within an organized framework so that students can get what they need" (p. 7).

SALL seems to arouse controversy in two aspects: the cost-efficiency and the development of autonomy. Regarding the former, authors such as Aston (1993) see this mode of learning as a cost-saving proposition, which eventually could substitute for direct teaching. Whereas others like Gardner and Miller (1997) think that:

> …[i]mplementing SALL should not be seen as a cheap alternative to teaching. It should be seen as a useful complement to teaching which enhances language-learning opportunities and provides learners with the independent learning skills to continue learning languages after they have finished formal studies. In this light, it may be judged to be relatively cost efficient. (p. 32)

Regarding the latter, it is known that although this mode of learning is supposed to promote learners' autonomy, it does not necessarily occur. Students may be working by themselves in a SAC but still doing what their teachers told them to do (Reinders, 2000). Along the same lines, McMurry et al. (2010) suggest that a common problem self-access centers face is that full autonomy is not usually promoted due to the fact that most independent work learners carry out is still teacher-led. That is to say, "a self-access centre could be used as a teacher-directed source of individualized homework activities, but this would in no way constitute self-directed learning" (Sheerin, 1994, p. 144). In any case, there are positive postures towards SALL. Even if it is not undertaken with the aim of becoming autonomous learners, "…[s]elf-access learning is the practical solution to many language teaching problems: mixed-ability classes, students with different backgrounds and needs, psychological and personality differences between students, etc." (Sheerin, 1989, p. 7).

I find the latter coincides with the idea Gardner and Miller (1997) have about SALL as a mode of learning that offers varying degrees of guidance but still encouraging students to move

towards autonomy. Achieving such autonomy, in my view, does not depend on the mode of learning itself, nor on the SAC where students may work, but on their attitude, their decision and the education system in which they may be immersed.

Methodology

Process of Data Collection

Considering that the aim of the current study is not to 'measure' anything but to study the events in their natural setting, that is, to understand students' perceptions and to make sense of or to construe their experiences in the specific context where they evolve, I decided to adopt a qualitative perspective to carry this out.

Qualitative research intends to look deeply into the quality of the social life in particular settings, permitting the exploration of the important themes that may emerge, those mysteries of reality "to which the researcher must submit, and can do no more than interpret" (Holliday, 2002, p. 6). It studies small and/or particular groups of human actors in natural settings, in their everyday world, in a particular time. Thus, in this case, a group of students, taking an autonomous course at the SAC-Ver. during a semester, have been studied under this approach. In a similar way, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) describe qualitative research as that which "…looks to understanding a situation as it is constructed by the participants […, it] attempts to capture what people say and do, that is, the products of how people interpret the world" (p. 18).

Qualitative inquiry, then, seeks to understand the meanings and significance of certain humans' actions from their own perspective (Lankshear and Knobel 2004; Maykut and and Morehouse 1994; Richards 2003; Robson 2002), and it is done by employing a range of methods, and its analysis is based on a range of features. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) put it,

> [q]ualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter…[it] involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (p. 2)

In this case study, I used some data collection methods, commonly used in ethnographic research, such as: moderate participant observation and semi structured interviews. Regarding the 'moderate participation', DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) define it as a category in which the researcher is present at the scene of action,

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is identifiable as such, but does not actively participate nor engage in anything that people being observed are doing there. It does not mean that the observer/researcher can never interact with the people in there. As projected, I was able to observe the different areas, (Video, Audio, Computers', Multiple Uses, etc) that constitute the SACs, while students were working there. Moreover, I observed several counselling sessions coordinated by counsellors in whose groups the participants (interviewees) were enrolled.

The data collection phase took place at SAC-Ver, where I work as a counsellor. I interviewed university students who were taking English 1 and 2 as well as a few who had already finished, and a few external students who were studying EFL at the Language Centre but in the autonomous mode. I also interviewed some of the counsellors working there and the teacher who, at that time, was the Coordinator of the Language Centre and had been a counsellor at the SAC. Since I wanted to get the participants to share with me their opinions and views about the autonomous EFL courses, by giving them "a degree of power and control over the course of the interview" (Nunan, 1992, p. 150), I used a semi-structured interview. This type of interview consists in having a list of questions and/or prompts to address the topic, considering that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each interviewee; nevertheless, it does not have to be intrusive or directive (Cherulnik 2001; DeWalt & DeWalt 2002; Patton 2002).

As another method to gather data, I looked at the students' work reports that were processed on the computers located at the Check in/out Area of the SAC-Ver. These were monthly reports which included information related to the total time the students had worked at the SAC in a certain period of time and the areas they had worked on (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, video, audio, etc.). I decided to consider these documents as another piece of data because as Robson (2002) mentions, written documents are not affected by the fact of being used. Besides, the participants' opinions and behaviors would not be affected by my checking the reports. I meant to use the information obtained by this means to complement the information I was able to gather through the interviews and observations.

After a thorough revision of literature on methodology, the steps I followed during the actual process of data collection were:

1. Getting ready to start the data collection phase
2. Turning up in the field
3. Meeting with the bosses
4. Becoming a stranger (an outsider)
5. Meeting with the SAC counsellors
6. Reflecting on my returning to the place where I worked (the SAC) but as a researcher this time

7. Selecting the 'Participants' (among the students taking English 1 and 2 in autonomous courses, and the counselors working in these autonomous courses at the SAC)
8. Contacting and inviting the participants (2 English-2 ex-students; 8 English-1 students and 10 English-2 students–, 4 counsellors and the coordinator of the Language Centre)
9. Carrying out the interviews
10. Carrying out the observations (different Areas at the SAC and some Counselling Sessions)
11. Reviewing the students' records (work reports).

Process of the Data Analysis

I here describe succinctly the themes and sub-themes that were uncovered throughout the processing of the data. For this analysis, I adopted and adapted some elements from procedures such as the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba 1985, based on Glaser & Strauss 1967; Maykut & Morehouse 1994); the concept-coding method suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), and the approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The reason for choosing these methods was that they suited the analysis of data during the data collection stage, as well as later on, when I had already collected all the data. The actual process of my data analysis consisted in the following stages:

1. Organizing the data (the total number of interviews that I did was 45, whereas I completed 29 observations that were analyzed)
2. Coding the data materials (transcripts and field notes)
3. Highlighting the important information on the data materials
4. Reviewing, again, the data materials
5. Summarizing the data
6. Labeling the data: first-level codes
7. Labeling the data: second-level codes
8. Inventorying the data
9. Grouping the codes (first/second-level)
10. Displaying the data (in a Matrix)
11. Naming categories (preliminary, sub-, and categories)
12. Refining categories, uncovering themes
13. Designating hierarchies to the categories
14. Moving towards interpretation (See Table 1 below)
15. Summarizing the data for their presentation

As it can be noted, Table 1 illustrates how I organized the data, once these had been processed, so that the sub-themes and themes started to emerge. Since First-level Codes are too detailed, for practical reasons, they have been omitted from the table.

Findings

After having analyzed the data in an integral way, this section deals with the outcomes obtained. That is, the subthemes and themes that emerged from such data analysis (See Table 1: Sub-Categories = several Sub-themes and Categories = two broad Themes) give rise to the Findings of the study, which are stated and supported throughout the most representative evidences taken from the data. In order to demonstrate where the excerpts of the data are taken from (interviews or fieldnotes), they are coded as follows:

▶ S = student and a number (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.is given to each student who was interviewed)
▶ C = counsellor and a number (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.is given to each counsellor who was interviewed)
▶ FN = fieldnote (cs = from an observation in a counselling session; sac = from an observation in the SAC).

Students' perceptions of the autonomous learning mode

▶ *Finding 1* → Importance of learning English as a foreign language
Contrary to the expectations of the project (implementing self-access centres and autonomous courses) and its advocates' discourse of the importance of learning English, the vast majority of students seemed to be basically interested in passing the subject, in fulfilling one of the requirements of their majors rather than in learning the language. This can be demonstrated by the following extracts from the data.

> *S2: …my first [expectation] was to cover [fulfil] my credits, it has always been to finish, to finish this subject and that's it…*

> *S4: Well, in my case I worry more about finishing [passing] the subject rather than exactly about learning it, though I know I have to learn English […] I'll learn later, after I finish my major.*

> *C1: …and MEIF [university] students?... they don't give a damn!, they don't care, they just want a grade and that's it; they have no idea of what they will do here…*

▶ *Finding 2* →Ease and convenience of the autonomous courses
Most students seemed to have recognized the value of the autonomous courses based on the convenience and easiness (management of their time and schedules) that they attributed to these courses, rather than on their contribution to their

Table 1. Organizing and categorizing the data.

SPECIFIC/DETAILED →→		→→ BROAD/GENERAL
More		Fewer
******		**
******	→	**
******		*
Second-level Codes	**Sub-Categories =Sub-themes**	**Categories = Themes**
• Interest in learning English	Importance of learning EFL *Finding 1*	Students' perceptions of the autonomous learning mode
• Lack of interest in learning English • Fulfillment of a requirement		
• Ss' schedules • Features of the course	Ease and convenience of the autonomous courses *Finding 2*	
• Distance between Ss' schools and the SAC • Lack of time to attend the SAC • Lack of Ts' constant presence	Difficulty and inconvenience of the autonomous courses *Finding 3*	
• Students' expectations	Fulfillment of students' expectations *Finding 4*	
• Students' dealing with the autonomous mode	Experiencing Autonomy *Finding 5*	Students' experiences within the autonomous learning mode
• Importance of logs • Control over Ss' activities • Surveillance • Records of attendance	Control over students *Finding 6*	
• Reflectivity • Lack of reflectivity • Awareness	Awareness and Reflectivity *Finding 7*	
• Lack of information/misunderstanding	Preparation to face the innovation *Finding 8*	
• SAC & Ss' attitudes, (gregariousness, preferences, performance)	The operation of the autonomous mode *Finding 9*	
• Counsellors' role • Co Sessions' role • Similarity to a regular class		
• Similarity to a regular class - Co Sessions • Program-oriented course • Exam-oriented course		
• SAC		
• Gains on personal development	Taking ownership of the innovation *Finding 10*	

learning English or on the own features of this type of courses, as shown in the following extracts.

> *S8: I wish it had been easier, last semester [English 1] wasn't hard at all, but this one [English 2] is more complicated…. I must work harder…… but for me it's very practical, because I take many subjects and my schedules are crazy, so for me it's very practical…in the autonomous [courses] the advantage is that it's only 1 hour a week and one can determine how long and when one can come during the week…*

> *C3: …they think they are coming just once a week and just listen to the teacher and that's it […] At some point they realize that it's very convenient for the rest of their subjects.*

▸ *Finding 3* → Difficulty and inconvenience of the autonomous courses

The lack of planning of the autonomous courses, especially in terms of the location of the buildings involved, the programs, the students' interests, the students' preparation for the change and the relevance of the subject (EFL), was a significant reason behind their difficult and slow 'routinization' (Sikes, 1992) and the scarce development of autonomy. A sample of this is presented in the following extracts from the data.

> *S1: The idea [to work in the self access centre] is good, but the distance from our schools was not considered. …mmm yes, CADI is far from my school [.…] I don't have time to come because of the distance, and I couldn't make [accumulate] enough hours of work.*

> *S19: …it's nuts to be handing in assignments, final exams […] now that final exams will be over, we'll be more stress-free, but before that, I really didn't have the time, or maybe the organization… of the time, always… I should be more organized…*

> *C3: Well…it's obvious that students who are forced to take the autonomous, and mmmm…it's the majority, see?, they have more difficulties to adapt to this mode […] yes, students need somebody to guide them… they crave it!!*

▸ *Finding 4* → Students' expectations from the autonomous courses

The autonomous mode of studying EFL failed to meet several of the students' expectations, and this had a significant impact on their perception of the whole project, resulting in their partial acceptance of this mode and their preference of the class mode. This can be observed in the succeeding quotations.

S2: mmm… more than anything I didn't expect a counselling session at CADI but something like tools to reinforce my knowledge, and it has been accomplished for example with the audio system, the computers and all the materials that we can find here, it has been as I expected…

S4: …at the beginning I thought it was not going to work for me, but it certainly worked, but it's not the same, I would've preferred to have a class with a teacher and classmates, because the counselling session …ehhmm… didn't help me much… don't tell the teacher eh! [secretly, in very low voice]

Students' experiences within the autonomous learning mode

▶ *Finding 5 →* Experiencing Autonomy
Some students were able to achieve some degree of autonomy, though 'autonomy' in this context seems to refer to actions such as: choosing when and how long to attend, and what to work on at the SAC; deciding to actually work or to pretend to be working in order to accumulate credits; determining their attendance and participation in the counselling sessions; and trying their best to pass the subject. These actions can be noticed in the following passages.

S10: The tools are there and one knows if we use them and what time, how long and how to use them according to your own capacities. If I organize myself I can do the things by myself […] for me it's easier because I know myself, I know my moments, I know how to organize myself […] and for me it's easier to take it in this mode than depending on a fixed schedule or on other people…

FNsac: One of the girls who has been working very focused, writes on her log, turns off the tape recorder, gives back the tape and changes to another area (MUA). The girl next to her does the same. They start working with other materials.

On the other hand, some of the possible causes for students' failing to carry out the autonomous courses might be: Resisting the imposition of the innovation; Misinterpreting the notions of autonomy as used in the educational setting; Identifying the mismatch between the 'discourse of the new mode of studying' and their experience as students in an institutional context, attitudes that can be noted in these passages.

C4: […] they usually do grammar, grammar and grammar. In fact they like the fact that they can do and practice what-

ever they want, well… when they want!! […] Some students are reluctant to work, they just don't want to do anything, they don't care.

FNsac: Two girls sit next to each other, start playing the videos and start talking, they put on the earphones but only in one ear so that they can keep on chatting; they pretend they're watching the video and writing or rather looking at the worksheet, but they are chatting (whispering) all the time. However other students seem to be working they watch attentively, rewind the videotapes and write on their worksheets.

▶ *Finding 6* → Control over the students

Contrary to the claim that the autonomous mode was based on and fostered principles of autonomy and independence, important factors which suggested that surveillance and control were subtly exerted over the students in the autonomous mode were revealed, as it can be read in the subsequent extracts.

S10: …I became more responsible because they put pressure on us, I mean they force you to study and to study the basic things… what they are going to ask you [in the exams].

S6: …it [the CADI and the autonomous mode] is like a father with a belt in his hand telling you to do the things…

C4: We have decided not to check more hours, now we are more interested in the activities they have done during the week…

FNsac: The assistants are working on the computers; suddenly one of them starts walking around the CADI just to see what the students are doing… they must be working quietly???

▶ *Finding 7* → Awareness and Reflectivity

Despite the difficulties faced by some students undergoing this new mode of learning EFL, there seemed to be a significant enhancement of some students' capacity for making decisions and evaluations, and for developing reflectivity and awareness of their own learning processes and of their situation as university students throughout their autonomous courses. This may be demonstrated through the next excerpts.

S13: I like to come like this [whenever she can/wants] very much, because I know how long I can stand being in the CADI, how long I'm going to be studying and what I need to reinforce, the things I already master I leave them aside and I devote time to other things […] then I know when, what and

how long I need to study [...] I can visualize it, it all depends on me [...]. [It's been useful] in other subjects and in my life, I can visualize the things in which I'm failing and to what I have to devote more time...

S6: I feel that maybe it didn't work for me because I am in this kind of transition period in which I'm withdrawing from the teachers. But I think it could work, I feel it could, because at work, we won't have a teacher to tell us what it's about...

FNcs: The boy tells the counsellor how difficult he's found to study English, so the Co asks him how he studies, what exactly he does to study grammar, vocabulary, listening. The boy tells him what he does step by step, so Co questions him about some of his methods. It seems they're talking about learning strategies....interesting!.

▸ *Finding 8* → Preparation to face the innovation
A substantial output of the research suggested that significant problems in the autonomous courses were: the stakeholders' lack of preparation to embark on the innovation; their reluctance to use the SAC materials, which could have been of help in this preparation, and the scarce efficacy of the introduction session. I here present some extras regarding this issue.

S7: ...of course, later you find out the good things, but I wish that before we started the course, somebody, maybe the secretaries had told us: 'you know guys there are two types of learning modes, one is the autonomous that is like this and like that..., and the other is the class mode that you already know that you have a teacher'... and so on and so on... [...] they should say the pretty things of this method, don't you think so?

C3: ...well first of all, they don't know what CADI is, they don't know exactly what they are going to do, they have a completely different idea of what they are expected to do......students need training, steps to follow, some kind of guide, otherwise they get lost, they don't know what to do [...] ... they have no idea because they have a very bad background [from previous school education]...

▸ *Finding 9* → The operation of the autonomous mode
Contrary to the system's claims and despite the changes this new mode of studying implied and the stakeholders' trying to conform it, the customary idea of the class-teacher-student triad seemed to be so embedded in the counsellors' and the students' schemata, that, maybe involuntarily, it was still put

into operation in the counselling sessions as well as in the SAC, making the new autonomous mode pretty similar to the regular class system. The former can be observed in the following quotations.

> C2: …so at the beginning they think that teachers, well counsellors will help them or will explain everything, that's the problem, so when you explain the way we work they are a little afraid of that… They are expecting that you help them and explain everything as a regular class, as if they were in a regular class.

> FNcs: Co dictates some questions, ss work on them, [later] Co asks them to say their answers; a girl says her answer, Co corrects when necessary and models the language; the rest of the group listen and correct their own sentences.

> S2: …the counselling session is important and necessary, yes because, because the teacher is going to solve everything, yes, all your doubts, the structures, the why this and why that. […] We first speak in Spanish and then she says, 'well, we saw this unit, ok? is it true that you learnt?, well, she asks you, she evaluates you… […] when I get to the teacher she tells me 'look, you're wrong because you don't pronounce correctly, you're missing this and that…

▸ *Finding 10* → Taking ownership of the innovation (autonomous mode and SAC)
An unexpected result was that most of the stakeholders, the counsellors and the students, seemed to be taking ownership of the innovation by gaining knowledge and experience, by participating in the development of the system, and especially the students by doing what they considered appropriate and convenient for them, which was mostly related to time and credits issues. This appropriation may be clear in the subsequent extracts.

> S2: There should be more books, novels or magazines; I used them when I had to accumulate more hours to get my points [credits]… and it was cool!!

> S7: …I have acquired the responsibility to learn by myself. I now realize how much I can do, how far I can get […] and I can identify, well something like that, my own qualities and use them after my own interests…

> C3: The system has had some progress, it has evolved… the method and the students […] they can now work better and

> *take advantage of the CADI and also of the counselling sessions….well those who want…*
>
> *FNsac: The 4 remaining students in the CA (computers' area) seem concentrated, they're quiet and using different programs, they look interested and focused, in addition, they're accumulating points/credits.*

Revisiting the Research Questions

Based on the outcomes presented above, I now endeavor to answer the questions that conducted this research by relating them to the corresponding Findings:

1. Are the new 'autonomous courses' (based on principles of self-direction and SALL) functioning according to what the university intends to?
    Based on the inconsistency between the university discourse and the facts derived from and supported by the data, it seems necessary to reappraise and reorient the project (the autonomous system) during the 'routinizing' stage (Sikes, 1992) the system is going through, so that it can foster the students' learning and independence.

2. How do students studying EFL perceive the self-instruction mode?
    Students' perceptions have been described in Findings 1, 2 and 3 through the most relevant evidence from the data.

3. What are the students' experiences within this innovation (the self-instruction mode of learning and the use of the Self-access Centre)?
    How the students reacted and acted when facing their autonomous courses, including their components: the counsellors, the counselling sessions and the SAC, has been explained in Findings 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

Implications and conclusions

Implications of the research in the EFL Local Context

Based on the outcomes of the current study I may suggest that the 'autonomous mode' of learning/teaching foreign languages (especially English) has evolved and has been institutionalized in such a way that has become suitable to the educational system in general and to this university's system in particular, in spite of

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its divergence with the promotion of 'autonomy'. For this reason, I suggest that the local needs' analyses, evaluations of the actual development of the autonomous system (autonomous courses and SACs) should be done, and by interweaving the former, it may be redesigned and made more suitable to the local context, and more congruent with their principles (Finding 4).

In this new design, other foreign languages and modes of teaching/learning (virtual, blended, E-learning, Mobile-learning, etc.) would have to be included in the schema (Finding 1). It must be mentioned that even though such an evaluation has not been formally done, multi-modal and virtual English courses have been incorporated to the academic offer at the university, particularly at the SACs.

Implications of the research in EFL Worldwide Context

Since not all the schools, where SALL and SACs have been implemented, hold the same characteristics (sociocultural, economic, administrative), it is important to address the local context where an innovation is to be adopted. Imported programs and technology, that is, any innovation needs to take into consideration the features of the places where they are to be applied, by being sensitive to the contexts and by creating a 'sense of local ownership' in order to prevent or minimize possible negative results, 'tissue rejection' as Holliday (1992, p. 403) identifies it.

On the other hand, after an innovation has been implemented, adapted, and appropriated in a certain context, it should aim to keep congruent with its new features and should not insist on keeping inadequate original elements such as names (Findings 5 and 6), procedures, etc., just to pretend that it is functioning like 'everywhere else'. I insist that it is essential to have a critical posture that allows innovations to evolve in agreement with their corresponding contexts.

Conclusions

Based on concepts such as autonomy, self-access language learning, self-access centres and the outcomes form this research, I can infer that the Language Centre, where this study took place, has been actually offering 'semi-directed courses' an not 'autonomous courses' (as they pretend), to many students who seem not to be interested in learning English and who find it difficult to go to the SAC, since they take their classes in different campuses far from it. However, since students need to pass the subject, and this kind of courses do not require to attend a scheduled class, the 'autonomous mode' of learning/teaching EFL has been

institutionalized in such a way that it has become suitable to the university's system, even though it does not fulfill the students' expectations and differs from the notion of 'autonomy'.

Data reveals that the 'autonomous' mode is still regulatory and controlling, from the program to the procedures and evaluation; however, some students acknowledge that even when they were not prepared for this innovation, they have developed some sense of responsibility, awareness and reflectivity throughout these courses, which has lead to the appropriation of this mode of teaching/learning.

It is worth mentioning that expanding the offer of foreign language courses to non-conventional teaching/learning modes implies moving along a continuum that goes from face-to-face to virtual courses. That is to say, between these two boundaries, there are several approaches to teaching/learning, such as: autonomous, multi-modal (blended learning), Mobile learning, E-learning, just to mention some. To be able to offer any of these, administrators, teachers/facilitators, technicians and students should be prepared and open to the frank and contextualized incorporation of ICT in the development of the courses. This would constitute a step forward in responding to the demand for communicating in different languages not only in the academic milieu but in this multi and intercultural society.

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