# Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

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## Abstract

Currently, autonomous learning has been extensively researched by educational experts to understand how it is perceived and implemented in educational settings. This study focuses on exploring the perceptions of teachers and students regarding autonomous learning in the context of English language teaching. Questionnaires were distributed to two English teachers and five English students from the language department of the University of Guanajuato in Mexico. The participants were randomly selected, and data was collected through interviews consisting of open and closed questions. The results revealed that both teachers and students held positive views on autonomous learning, but they lacked a complete understanding of its concepts. The findings also highlight the need for teacher training in autonomous learning. The study concludes with recommendations for teachers and English education programs.

*Keywords*: autonomous learning, classroom, strategies, challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Autonomous learning has gained popularity as teachers and students seek to incorporate it into the language classroom. Tsai (2019) notes that autonomous learning has been a widely discussed approach to language learning. As Berka (2000) points out, the concept of "autonomy" dates back to Ancient Greece, where it was a significant part of students' learning process. Current studies indicate that autonomous learning activities play a crucial role in the classroom, facilitating knowledge acquisition, motivation, interest, goal setting, and self-evaluation (Khotimah et al., 2019). However, despite its increasing popularity, it is important to understand the perspectives of teachers and students when working with this approach in the classroom. Based on the idea of understanding how autonomous learning was perceived in the language department of the University of Guanajuato, I wanted to identify the opinions of five students of English and two English teachers who had worked with the autonomous learning approach in the classroom. To do so, the participants were asked a series of open and closed questions about autonomous learning. Their responses were then analyzed to identify differences, contrasts, and valuable insights regarding the perceptions of autonomous learning.

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2. Background

In this section, the main concepts that integrate the theoretical framework of this paper will be discussed. These are: Language learning, autonomous learning, and autonomous learning in the classroom.

According to the NC State University (n.d.), language learning is a process of construction conducted mainly by the learner but facilitated by the instructor. The learner enhances their capability to utilize the language for specific communication objectives. The teacher models language use and facilitates students' development of language skills. Instructors and students work together to identify how students expect to use the language. The instructor demonstrates correct and appropriate language use, and students then apply the language themselves in practice activities that mimic real communication scenarios.

In relation to language learning, autonomous learning has become a prominent aspect of language education in the 21st century (Anh, 2019). Holec (1981) one of the most popular researchers on autonomy in language teaching has defined autonomy as the student's ability to take responsibility in their language learning process. According to Betts and Kercher (1999), an autonomous learner solves problems through deep thinking and functions with minimal external guidance. Through autonomous learning, students can set their learning goals according to their needs, devise methods to achieve those learning goals, as well as monitor and evaluate their learning progress. However, Lengkanawati (2017) suggests that learner autonomy, or autonomous learning, is frequently misinterpreted as the ability to learn independently, without the support of a teacher or instructor. It is also sometimes misunderstood as students being solely responsible for the learning process, without the need for planning and evaluation. According to the study by Kotimah et al. (2019), The misconception of the term "autonomous learning" is likely due to the limited knowledge that both students and teachers have about this concept. This lack of understanding is understandable, given that autonomous learning first originated in Western Europe context (Benson & Huang, 2008).

In the autonomous language classroom, there are two main important roles: the teacher's role and the student's role. First, according to Yan (2012), there is a misinterpretation of the teacher's role, which is no longer seen as important in autonomous learning. However, teachers play a crucial role in the students' learning process, and their responsibilities can not be overlooked. Learner autonomy is based on the learner´s independence and active attitude towards learning. The learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning. But without teachers' counseling and guidance, the whole process of learning will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder. Second, according to Little (1991) self-instruction tend to be a synonym for autonomy, but they are not equivalent. Self-instruction refers to the situation in which the learner is working on their own without the direct control of the teacher (Dickinson 1995). On the contrary, in autonomous learning, learners take responsibility for goal-setting, materials selection, learning activities, or assessment, instead of a teacher or self-study materials being in overall charge (Benson, 2001). Second, is the student's role, according to Horvath (2007), an autonomous learner is a reflective learner, a person actively involved in his/her learning. Little (1996) mentions that learners are willing to make a conscious effort to understand what, why, and how they are learning. The learners, would set their own learning goals, select the learning strategies that suit them best and which are appropriate to their contexts, and evaluate their progress so that they may become more effective learners and take more responsibility for their learning (Yan, 2012).

In the study of Al Asmari (2013), there are strategies teachers can use to foster autonomous learning in the classroom. One of the important characteristics of the autonomous classroom is pair and group work as a means to develop learner autonomy. The fact is that learners become less dependent on the teacher by learning to collaborate with their peers. In this regard,

Jacobs and Farrell (2001) argue that group activities play a large part in this because learners acquire a lot of learning strategies when collaborating with, and receiving support from their peers and not just the teacher. Also, students need to be involved in formulating classroom rules to feel a part of the community in which learning takes place and it encourages them to take greater responsibility for their learning (Voller, 1997). As a facilitator, a teacher can promote learner autonomy through the curriculum by integrating the principles of autonomy into the learning goals, the learning process, tasks, learner strategies, and reflection on learning (Asmari, 2013). Yet, many teachers may encounter difficulty in involving the students in autonomous learning. One because, it represents a challenge as the students may have different expectations and learning styles. Also, teachers could be afraid of handing over some responsibility to their learners for fear of losing control, especially if they have had control of the classroom for most of their teaching life (Lacey, 2007). In addition, there are teachers that have a strict curriculum to follow and deadlines to meet which makes the development of autonomy in the classroom more difficult (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003).

The studies done in Western (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Little, 1996; Benson, 2001) and in Asian (Asmari, 2013; Yan, 2012; Kotimah et al., 2019) indicate that autonomous learning in the classroom has been a widely studied approach. In contrast, little research in autonomous learning in Mexican contexts has been discussed. It is Hernández (2021), among other researchers, who investigated the influence of autonomous learning on the learning process. It is for this reason that further studies in the area of autonomous learning in Mexican contexts are necessary. Therefore, this study aims to research about the perspectives of students and teachers on autonomous learning in a Mexican context.

### 3. Methodology

The objective of this study is to explore the perceptions of teachers and students about autonomous learning and how it is applied in the classroom. Therefore, the research question for this paper is: What are the perceptions of students and teachers of autonomous learning? I now approach the paradigm that will be used for the purposes of this study. According to Sale, Lohfeld and Brazil (2002) the qualitative paradigm comprehends that reality is formed by individuals. Therefore, it is changing constantly. The investigator and the object of study are interactively linked so that findings are created within the context of the situation which complement the issue of investigation (Guban & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigm of this research is qualitative as it makes emphasis on process and meanings. The following section will explain the method.

The case study approach is a research design that is used in a variety of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences (Stake, 1995). According to Yin (1994), case studies can be used to explain, describe, or explore events or phenomena in the everyday contexts where the researcher can identify the features of the social community regarding certain issues. The common instruments for collecting data are the interviews and observations (Crowe et al., 2011). This method was chosen because the topic is based on students' perceptions of autonomous learning and its application in class activities.

### 3.1 *Context and participants*

The study took place in the Language Department of the university of Guanajuato, in Guanajuato city, Mexico. An independent public school in Mexico. The Language Department is a division for the learning of languages as English, French, Japanese, German and Italian. Specifically, for the English program the school accounts with eight levels that are design to help the students reach an B2 or more in the TOEFL scale.

The students who were interviewed were at the intermediate English level (400). The students have worked with autonomous activities in the classroom.

The teachers who were interviewed had around 10 years of experience teaching English from beginner levels to advance levels. It is also important to mention that both teachers were graduated from the Lei program and the master's degree on applied linguistics.

The number of interviewees were 5 students (women) and 2 teachers (women). The interview was done individually and recorded.

### 3.2 *Instrument*

The instrument used to collect the data was semi structured interviews as this instrument set a general plan for what the researcher wants to ask; the questions do not have to follow a particular order. Yet, it follows flexibility in the questions, allowing the researcher to explore various aspects of the presented issue (Ruslin et al., 2022). For the aims of this study, I wanted to know specific aspects as the knowledge of the autonomous learning concept, the features of the autonomous learning concept. However, the research led to other open questions as aspects that affect the concept of autonomous learning that is why the semi-structured interview help to this research, then used in the study. The questions asked to the participants were planned according to their perceptions about autonomous learning and what can affect this approach, also other questions arise from the conversation about autonomous learning.

For the collection of data, the participants were informed of the study, their participation was voluntary, and they signed a consent form in which they were aware of their rights to participate, to withdraw their participation any time, and that their identity was protected.

### 3.3 *Data processing and analysis (procedures followed)*

To process the data and organize the information. The collected results passed through two levels: macro and micro levels.

At the macro level, information was collected in a broad manner. The recorded interviews were transcribed into a Word document, translated and organized in a table. According to the table, the information was organized per person interviewed. In the research technique area, the instruments we use will be placed. In the raw data extracts/unit of meaning area, the actual answers provided by the participants will be found. In the code from the data area, the concept assigned to the answer based on literature revised by the researcher will be placed. The literature extract that supports the concept will be placed in the interpretation section. In the data identificator area, the number, word, letters, or names that we assigned to identify the group of data will be placed.

At the micro level, the information was independently organized to match each answer with its corresponding code and identifier. The following steps were followed. The information at the macro level was reviewed to identify the most frequently repeated codes, highlighting the significance of these codes and themes in the research.

In the table, the theme will be placed in the first column of the code. In the second column of responses, the raw data extracts with the same code (theme) were collected and placed. These answers will be gathered not just from one person but rather from all the participants who discussed the same theme. In the third column of the IP, the identifiers of the extracts placed in the first macro level table were included. During the information check, we were able to identify the participant who provided the information and the location of that information. The process of

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organizing the information in these three columns will be repeated with each code (theme) presented in our macro-level analysis.

### 4. Results

The data collected from the interviews revealed valuable information about students' and teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning. To present the extracts from the interviews, each participant was assigned a code. Because the interviews were done in Spanish, the extracts presented as part of the results are translated from the original to English. In this section, the study results will be discussed based on three themes related to the research question: the concept of autonomous learning, strategies for autonomous learning and the challenges it presents.

### 4.1 *Autonomous learning concept*

In the questionnaire discussion, it was found that the majority of the students and one of the teachers view autonomous learning as individual studying, using the tools they found and without relying on the teacher's help. On the other hand, some students and one teacher considered autonomous learning as a way to actively engage in the language learning process, with the teacher serving as a guide to assist them in clarifying doubts. One of the students suggested the following:

> *It is an individual form of study in which you study on your own, you read books and do activities without the help of a tutor or, perhaps, the school* (SSofia_1).

For Sofia, autonomous learning was a method of studying independently, where the student carries out all activities without assistance from any external person or institution. Sofia shared that she has been learning a few things autonomously using just the internet.

Similar to Sofia's opinion, Aure also shared that autonomous learning was learning without any help.

> *It's a way of learning, you put the topics you want to learn and you take your time, you don't need a tutor or a teacher to teach you the topics* (SAure_1).

Aure mentioned autonomous learning as learning independently, where you choose the topics to learn and the times for studying. Aure worked with autonomous learning in high school as she had to learn entire topics by herself.

In the teacher's side, Stacy pointed out autonomous learning as a self-directed learning.

> *It's self-directed. It's where you basically research something and practice it or try to do something yourself* […] (TStacy_1).

Stacy defined autonomous learning as students researching, learning, and practicing a subject independently. Stacy focused on the idea of students putting in more effort to delve deeper into their learning.

On the other hand, there were some students and a teacher who agree that autonomous learning was not just learning on your own, but rather learning with the teacher as a guide who can help you through the language learning process. One student suggested the following:

> *It could be you looking for resources to… I don't know how to improve the learning you have or learn things from scratch, and this is not necessarily like you do it completely alone* […](SMarta_1).

For Marta, autonomous learning was not just about doing and learning on your own, but rather about seeking tools that could enhance your learning. Marta stated that when working with autonomous learning activities, you can rely on the teacher, ask friends, colleagues, and the internet for advice on how to do things, but not for learning a lesson.

On the teacher's side, Blanca mentioned that when working with autonomous learning the student took the decision to go beyond what is taught in class, but it did not mean learning alone.

> To be self-taught does not mean that you have to do it alone, it simply means that you will learn what you want, when you want, how you want […], but you will need a guide, not a teacher, a guide […] (TBlanca_1).

Blanca pointed out that there might be a misunderstanding when working with autonomous learning in the classroom. Blanca mentioned that seeking autonomy in language learning does not negate the importance of guidance.

As Lengkanawati (2017), one of the most recent researchers on autonomous learning, pointed out, confusion regarding different concepts of autonomous learning arises due to a lack of understanding of the term. As can be seen in the previous opinions, autonomous learning is mostly perceived as the process of learning in which the student is left on their own. However, some participants in the study understand that autonomous learning, particularly when considering its application in the classroom, does not imply working in isolation. Instead, it involves viewing the teacher as a guide to enhance the language learning process.

### 4.2 Strategies for autonomous learning

The participants in the study mention the importance of the strategies when applying autonomous learning in the classroom. Most of the participants mention that getting involve with language was important. For example, three of them expressed the following:

> Involve the classes with personal interests such as watch movies, listen to music or so on that interests each person so that learning is something more like…. […] it is because I like it and I am learning it (SMaria_3).

Maria suggested that connecting the topics to the personal interests of the students can be a good strategy to encourage learners to involve with the language in multiple ways. It can be through movies, music and series.

Regarding Sofia's perspective, unless the activities were mostly internet-based, another strategy for autonomous learning was making the activities more dynamic.

> I think that we could put more dynamic activities and not only activities like web pages (SSofia_6).

For Sofia, improving autonomous learning could be achieved by engaging in interactive activities during class. Sofia meant dynamic as a way activities are designed in which they do not follow the traditional pattern, meaning that they involve games, kinesthetic activities, activities where you can be creative, and so on.

As a teacher, Blanca suggested that teachers can bring interesting material to encourage the students to research more about the topic or material given.

> I try to bring material where they can say this vocabulary is interesting so they feel like... I want to keep looking for this information, or bring material that they feel may be of interest to them, so that they can continue in their free time […] (TBlanca_2).

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Blanca noticed that when she provided students with trendy or socially relevant material that they use in their daily lives, the students were more engaged. This led them to make an effort to research and learn more about the material, resulting in consistently receiving information in the language.

In the responses, it is clear that students engaged in autonomous learning prefer to have access to materials and resources that match with their interest and allow them to actively participate in the language. The variety of activities is also important, as repetitive tasks can lead to a lack of interest and demotivation among students. Teacher Blanca's years of experience have shown how autonomous learning can be promoted in the classroom through the use of diverse trendy and outstanding materials, which can encourage students to work independently.

Also, one of the participants commented on the use of the self-access center (CAADI) of the language department of the University of Guanajuato:

> *A good idea to implement autonomous learning would be for the teachers in the area to take up this support with the CAADI, there in the CADI they have a lot of material* (TBlanca_4).

Although students can find various resources on the internet and materials provided by their teachers, Blanca mentioned the presence of a self-access center in the language department. This center offers materials specifically designed for autonomous learning.

In addition, teacher Stacy pointed out that besides the tools that students and teachers can use in the classroom, another strategy is to raise students' awareness of language learning.

> *Help the student recognize the importance or purpose of learning the language so they can understand what the benefits are for them…. […] another strategy would be to see what they want to know or explore about the language and then encourage them or help them brainstorm what they want to know…. […]* (TSatcy_2).

Stacy believes that it's important to make students aware of the benefits of language learning in order to motivate them and encourage them to engage in autonomous learning activities. By explaining to students, the importance of the language, its benefits, and the support available from the teacher, students will be open to explore the language on their own.

These quotes highlight the importance of using materials as a strategy for autonomous learning. Furthermore, utilizing the self-access center helps to facilitate access to materials designed specifically for students who wish to work autonomously on particular activities. In this school, promoting the CAADI program will greatly benefit students looking to enhance their language skills and knowledge. Finally, Stacy addressed a point that the other participants had not, making the students aware of the importance of learning a language. Autonomous learning is an approach to activities where students take the initiative to be involved in the language (Benson, 2001). For this reason, it is important that students understand the value of the language in their lives.


4.3 *Challenges for autonomous learning*

Challenges of autonomous learning were categorized into two main themes: attitudes towards autonomous learning and limitations of the school program towards applying autonomous learning.

### 4.3.1 *Attitudes towards autonomous learning*

In exploring responses of the students towards autonomous learning. It was found that students react to this way of working by getting anxious or simply by having a bad attitude towards autonomous learning. The participants expressed the following:

> *When I have a doubt, I get very overwhelmed and it's like, who am I asking? if I'm not understanding, I get distracted very easily* (SAure_4).

When Aure did not have a guide or someone to provide support in resolving doubts, the learning process becomes challenging. Aure mentioned that most of the time she wanted another person to confirm she is correct, so not having direct help makes her feel uncomfortable working with autonomous activities.

Similar to Aure, Nat shared that when she finished an activity and wanted to continue expanding her knowledge by improving, she did not know who to ask.

> *Sometimes I don't know what activity to do, I mean is like: I already did this, I already wrote it down, but it's still difficult for me, I don't know how to improve it* […] (SNat_5).

Nat felt overwhelmed by the idea of not having someone to tell her what to do next. Nat was unsure if she could ask the teacher to check her work. Therefore, Nat found it difficult to work autonomously.

On the teacher's part, Blanca mentioned that the majority of the students have a negative attitude when working with autonomous activities.

> *Many people say later, later, I don't have time, or many say that being autonomous is not my thing, and then the negativity starts* […] (TBlanca_5).

When Blanca gave autonomous activities in the classroom, she realized that the students considered them a waste of time. The students had a negative attitude in class because they were hesitant about putting in extra effort to learn.

In addition, Stacy added to the teacher's perspective. Stacy pointed out that working with autonomous activities also required additional effort on the part of the teacher.

> *For example, I have 26 students, all 26 students are going to be doing something different so that's too much for me to review and then give them feedback, give them guidance, so that would be the disadvantage* […] (TStacy_5).

Stacy commented that working with autonomous learning activities implies, among other things, letting the students choose the topic they want to work on. This can make it challenging for the teacher, as they have to review various assignments. Stacy mentioned that for teachers, there is also extra unpaid time involved, which might lead to a negative attitude towards implementing these activities in the classroom.

### 4.3.2 *Limitations of the school program towards autonomous learning*

In the answers about challenges of autonomous learning it was noted that a challenge did not mention by the students, but the teachers, was the program limitations. Teachers are the only ones who realize of this problem as they are involve in the school policies. The participants mentioned the following:

> *Sometimes because of the program we can't do many activities autonomous activities because I repeat, we have to make sure that they are understanding…. […] if they do not master the topic they go to the next level, and it is a bit difficult*

*for them.... [...] I repeat.... we have a program that must be followed* [...] (TBlanca_5).

For Blanca, the school program posed a challenge when it came to incorporating autonomous activities in the classroom. As teachers employed by an institution, they needed to check that students comprehended all the topics, which resulted in limited time for autonomous activities.

Stacy mentioned something similar, adding that there was very limited time in the program to implement autonomous activities.

*The program itself and the time* (TStacy_3)

The two teachers interviewed in this study highlight this aspect, as the demands of the school program require them to prepare students to understand a specific number of topics in a way that students can demonstrate their knowledge. If the teacher does not meet these curricula goals it might be a problem for the progress set up for the student. The number of autonomous activities should be planned carefully and aligned with the goals of the curriculum. In all cases, it is noticeable that the school program established is a challenge as teachers must meet certain goals during the course period. This puts pressure on teachers as they are required to report the activities and topics covered to the principals.

### 4.3.3 *Lack of understanding of autonomous learning*

It was relevant for this study to highlight one of the opinions of a teacher, in which she indicated that the poor integration of autonomous learning might be due to the teacher's lack of understanding of the concept.

> *Unfortunately not, some teachers don't really know about the concept, and I think that's where the students also get the wrong idea of what it is (autonomous learning)[...] but, there are other colleagues that I have seen, my respects because they know how, and the students don't even realize at what point they are already on their own* (TBlanca_8).

Blanca commented that autonomous learning cannot be applied in the classroom if the teacher does not know about the concept or how to apply it. The good application of autonomous learning could lead to great results. However, if the teacher does not know about this approach, the students might misunderstand autonomous learning.

### 5. Conclusion

The results of this study offer teachers pedagogic decisions to promote students' autonomous learning in the class. It can be done by making the learner part of the learning environment for motivation, autonomy, and engagement. The issue of English teachers' autonomous learning training pointed out by the teachers of this study reflects a need for the education system to be improved. In this case. English education programs need to adjust their structure, and prepare English teachers with tools and workshops to promote autonomous learning activities in the class. The findings will be of interest to the teachers teaching in Mexican contexts to foment autonomous learning in the classroom as autonomous learning takes part in the current teaching strategies for English.

The current findings in this study were subject to at least three limitations. First, it was used just one instrument for collecting data. Second this study had seven participants. Third, this study was done considering just the Mexican context. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggested a need to study the expertise of English teachers in Mexico on autonomous learning and

provide support to the teachers in autonomous learning training. Further research is recommended in the following areas: a cross-national study considering other countries' application of autonomous learning in the classroom. In addition, the institution's program limitations towards using autonomous learning in public school contexts and private school contexts.

As a final reflection. I consider autonomous learning as a conscious effort on the part of the learner in which the learner is monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on the learning process. Therefore, the concept does not necessarily mean learning without a teacher but taking the teacher as a guide for support, guidance, and development of abilities.

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