

The Influence of Autonomous Learning in the Development of Listening for L2 Learners

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Resumen

Este documento de investigación presenta ideas relevantes acerca de la influencia del aprendizaje autónomo en el desarrollo de la habilidad de escucha en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. El trabajo afirma que la escucha es una de las habilidades más importantes en el desarrollo de una segunda lengua. Ya que, al ser una habilidad receptiva, provee al estudiante con conocimiento valioso (input) que promueve el desarrollo de otras habilidades tales como el habla. Por su complejidad, algunos estudiantes presentan dificultad en el desarrollo de esta habilidad. Por eso se sugiere que, si los profesores promueven el aprendizaje autónomo en sus estudiantes, brindándoles las herramientas que tengan en cuenta sus diferencias, necesidades e intereses, los estudiantes serán capaces de tomar decisiones que afecten positivamente su proceso de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, beneficiando su desarrollo de la habilidad de escucha, teniendo como resultado un proceso de escucha autónoma.

Abstract

This research paper presents relevant ideas about the influence of autonomous learning in the development of listening skill of foreign language students. It asserts that listening is one of the most important skills in the development of a second language. Since it is a receptive skill, listening provides students with valuable knowledge (input) that promotes the development of other abilities, such as speaking. Due to its complexity, some students present problems in the development of this skill. Thus, it is suggested that if teachers promote autonomous learning in their students, providing them with the necessary tools that take into account their differences, needs and interests, students will be able to make decisions that positively affect their second language learning process, therefore, benefiting their development of the listening process, resulting in autonomous listening skills.

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Introduction

Listening is a very important skill for any language learner. As most teachers agree, the mastery of this skill entails many benefits for language development. The more learners practice it, the more they will benefit. Rost (2001) claims that: “listening is not only a skill area in language performance, but it is also a critical means of acquiring a second language (L2)” (p.7). Since listening is a receptive skill and contributes enormously to language development, it is very important that students take time to develop it. However, when trying to improve their listening skill, students are used to their native language, causing difficulties with sounds and structures of the new language. But it is even more difficult when the learning process takes place in their own language context in which the possibilities to practice and improve language skills is very limited. This is the case of learners from Colombia whose native language is Spanish. Most of the time, they are exposed to this language and the opportunities to receive input in a second language are limited.

Unfortunately, as many teachers have perceived, some students in Colombia only put in practice their listening skill during study hours, and during their free time they barely dedicate time to improve it. The practice of the listening skill is normally carried out in the classroom and although it is a good source to for developing students’ listening comprehension, it is not enough. (Cross, 2014, p.9).

While such teaching seems undoubtedly valuable for developing learners’ listening comprehension, it can only offer limited hours and opportunities for practice and improvement. This is especially so for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), whose exposure to, and use of, English is often essentially restricted to the classroom. (Cross, 2014, p.9).

This situation becomes a problem and interferes with the correct development and improvement of a foreign language, making it necessary for teachers to find a strategy that allows students to practice their skills without someone supervising them all the time.

Autonomous learning plays an important role in trying to find a possible solution for this problem. If autonomous learners are able to take charge of their own learning process without the supervision of a tutor, students should actively take part in that process by making decisions concerning different aspects of their learning, and how knowledge should be imparted. Along with this, teachers must be aware of the importance of fostering autonomous learning in class with different tools that allow students to have a better development of the language learning process, taking into account the differences existing in the way they learn and their mixed abilities. The encouragement of autonomous learning will benefit students in the way they face their learning process and their behavior in environments different from the school where they are not supervised. In this case, it refers to more time outside the classroom spent in the practice of the listening skill, therefore, an autonomous listening skill.

Taking into account the above, this paper is aimed to highlight the influence of autonomous learning in the development of listening skills, based on the foundations presented by authors including (Nunan, Little, Holec, and others). Furthermore, there will be presented some implications for students and teachers, some ways to foster the autonomous learning in the students, and practice their listening skill.

Defining Autonomous Learning: Its Implications for Students and Teachers

For many teachers, the development of autonomy in students is crucial when learning a new language. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task. Teachers cannot expect that by making students develop activities in one or two days of class, they will become autonomous learners for the rest of their lives. Learning needs time, patience, and hard work, and above all that, it is worth trying to foster autonomy in students. For that purpose, teachers need to provide them with tools that help learners. Making their learning process easier.

To understand this idea, it is important to start by defining the concept of autonomy.

Holec (1981) defines it as:

The ability to take charge of one's own learning, to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, including: determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure and evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec, 1981, p. 3).

In other words, students are responsible for all the aspects of their own learning process. If we take into account that this means a lot of commitment and responsibility on the students' part, and since in general not all the students are willing to play an active role in that process, but especially in a culture like ours, we may have a problem here.

In a typical EFL classroom, students take the role of followers. In the sense that they limit their academic actions to following teacher's instructions and preparing daily homework, but they scarcely try to evaluate the value of the knowledge they are acquiring in classes, and they do not think of the possible future achievement of their life objectives.

In light of humanism, learners are the center of education, since only they can take the responsibility of controlling their own learning process. Under humanist approach a learner needs to develop autonomy. Dickinson says that autonomous learners are:

Those who have the capacity for being active and independent in the learning process; they can identify goals, formulate their own goals, and can change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests; they are able to use learning strategies, and to monitor their own learning. (as cited in Conttia, 2007, p.3).

However, it is believed by some teachers that most of Colombian students are so accustomed to receiving orders that they always prefer to be told what to do. When they are given freedom and independence, they feel lost and do not know how to act or what to do in order to learn effectively on their own. In reference to this idea, Nunan (1999) claims: “In fact, there are relatively few learners who are naturally endowed with the ability to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn it and when to learn from the moment that they first enter a learning arrangement” (p.11). It is in this situation when the teachers’ role becomes really important, because they are the ones in charge to foster autonomy in class since students are incapable to do it for themselves. Barfield (2001) claims: “...the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted” (as cited in Balçıkanlı, 2010, p. 3).

It is the teacher who should act as a facilitator in order to help the student become aware of the different learning routes and a better decision maker in order to maximize his learning potential. Thus, for Kumaravadivelu (2006):

The teacher’s work involves helping learners learn how to learn, equipping them with the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies necessary to self-direct their own

learning ...It also involves helping learners learn how to liberate...provide the learner with the tools necessary to realize the potential for social transformation” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 206).

This implies that the teacher should encourage his students to understand that they have the possibility to determine the course of their own learning process. As a result, he or she needs to work cooperatively with their students in order to familiarize them with a wide range of meaningful learning options, which elicit in them discernment and confidence, to continue with a lifelong learning process without feeling the necessity of being directed by someone else. For instance, the EFL teacher can guide the student in order to set them closer to the specific learning style he or she is likely to be most successful in. Likewise, teachers should provide students with opportunities to develop interpretative capabilities, and to become the creators of their own opportunities to relate to the social world in different and successful ways.

Since autonomous learning increases the students’ awareness of their learning needs and it “empowers them to be critical thinkers in order to realize their human potential”, it enriches the learner’s motivation and leads to a more effective learning. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 141). Thus, in an EFL class the teacher needs to persuade his learners of the benefits of getting involved in a self-learning language process, and help them identify and set realistic goals. For example, the teacher should remind his students about the long term academic and social rewards of learning a new language.

But there is a crucial question that has enormous implications in this process; how is it possible for teachers to foster autonomy in students, if they are not autonomous language learners? It is a matter of simple logic, thinking about trying to teach something that we as teachers have not developed yet. According to Little “it is unreasonable to expect teachers to

foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner.” (Little, 1995, p. 175).

Taking into account all of the above, it is possible to say that one of the main requirements to foster autonomous learning in the classroom is that teachers are autonomous learners. The second is that students must have a high level of motivation. As most scholars agree, motivation is a very important term that highly influences the process of learning a second language (L2). Dornyei believes that: “motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning.” (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000, Learner Attitudes section, para. 4). Along with that, Little (2006) also highlights the importance of motivation, but he focusses on one specific type of motivation which is the intrinsic motivation. He believes that: “autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation” (Little, 2006, p.2). The NRC (National Research Council) and the Institute of Medicine (2004) present the following situation in which students feel motivated and engaged. Teachers can take advantage of them and apply them in their classes.

- Motivation and engagement are enhanced where students develop education and career pathways. There are opportunities to learn the value of schoolwork for future educational and career prospects.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced when the organizational structure and services address student’s nonacademic needs.

- Motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have multiple pathways to competence. Engagement increases in environment where students have some autonomy selecting tasks and methods and play an active role in learning. (p.1101).

Fostering Autonomous Learning in the Classroom

The task of teachers is trying to move step by step, from a traditional classroom environment to an environment with many types of activities and different forms of evaluation. However, one fundamental aspect is that students take part and can be critic on the decisions about what is to be learned and how. Nunan claims:

In an autonomy-focused classroom, the teacher introduces a range of learning activities and tasks by taking the students' needs and interests into consideration as opposed to a non-autonomous classroom where students are exposed to the activities they are expected to perform. As for evaluation and assessment, classrooms which prioritize the development of autonomy allow the students to reflect on, assess and evaluate their own learning processes. (as cited in Balçıkanlı, 2010, p.93).

Therefore, the teacher will need to provide them with contextualized activities, which can be connected to their reality and world. These kind of activities are important because learners can find them useful and can easily find resources to practice such tasks with the guidance of the teacher, but most importantly on their own. Furthermore, it is true that students feel motivated when they feel engaged in their own learning process and when they find out the things they are learning are related to their own reality.

If learners see no value in an activity, they will pursue it only reluctantly, or not at all.

However, if the activity is of interest to them, if it reflects personal interests and it allows them to make choices they are likely to engage in the activity. (Alm, 2006, p.33).

Consequently, the student should be included in the decisions of what to learn and how the activities could be developed. For instance, teachers can re-adapt activities and use flexible schedules for students to accomplish them according to their suggestions. However, as the teacher constantly needs to monitor his students' progress, it will be useful to discuss with them the amount of homework they can cope with regarding their learning level, and keep deadlines for them. This also prevents students from misunderstanding the autonomous learning process a waste of time. Also, teachers can use test activities as a way to assess if the goals set by their learners are being achieved, and how they are coping with it. Besides, the teacher needs to give them clear and specific directions so that they can focus their attention on the outcomes that are expected, and can successfully achieve them.

To foster learner autonomy, it is important that the teacher can constantly update his students with different kinds of tools to carry out the self-determining work, with the purpose of helping them to make use of many sources of information, work with them at their own pace, and discover alternative tools as well.

If learners create their own "personal agenda for learning" then they will develop a sense of responsibility and commitment towards learning. (Chan, 2000, p.80). In order to make this possible, teachers need to implement strategies that help them structure their perceptions of learning.

Since the setting of a learning agenda and the identification of appropriate goals is something that must be done at regular intervals on the basis of feedback, it follows that learners must also become fully involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities. Such involvement is the essence of learner empowerment. (Little, 1999, p.83).

Thanasoulas (2000) propose the implementation of retrospective self-reports which are structured questionnaires or interviews that ask learners to retrospect on their past learning. Through these, teachers are able to “extract information about learners' feelings towards particular skills (reading, listening, etc.), problems encountered” (Thanasoulas, 2000, Self-report section, para. 2).

As teachers discover in their daily classroom work, not all students learn in the same way. For example, visual learners learn better through images and visual aids, while auditory learners prefer conversations and lectures. Extroverted and introverted learners will learn differently depending on their personalities and other characteristics. (Oxford, 2003). Moreover, students use different strategies in order to learn, some of these can be more successful than others.

In ESL instruction, a teacher who wants to cultivate a sense of autonomy in his or her students must “train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies” (Nunan, 2003, p.200). The teacher’s role is therefore to help students develop the capacity of identifying and implementing the strategies that fit with their personality, and that work better in language learning. There are many different ways in which a teacher can do this. For instance, Thanasoulas (2000) emphasizes the importance of diaries and evaluation sheets, since they allow students to examine and assess their learning process and recognize difficulties to propose possible solutions. Likewise, these activities allow students to monitor their outcomes to “put things into perspective and manage their learning more effectively” (Thanasoulas, 2000, Diaries and Evaluation Sheets section, para. 4).

Along with the students’ different learning styles and strategies to foster autonomous learning, it is also important to make a distinction between the knowledge that students learn in

the classroom and the knowledge they learn on their own. Barns calls these two types of knowledge *school knowledge* and *action knowledge* and claims that:

School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. Action knowledge is different. We use it for our own purposes; we incorporate it into our view of the world, and use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. (as cited in Dam, 1976, p.42).

Taking into account this statement, it can be said that the type of knowledge that students learn by themselves, as a product of the interaction with the world is very important and should be taken into account when trying to find strategies to foster autonomous learning.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that fostering autonomous learning requires teachers to take into account certain elements such as: students' needs, reflection, assessment and evaluation of their own learning processes, awareness of their own learning strategies, and providing them with contextualized activities that foster motivation.

The Importance of Listening in the Development of Language

It is undeniable that we as native speakers spend most our lives surrounded by listening experiences. Whether we watch television, listen to music or people having a conversation, it is a normal situation for us, and we do not give it too much thought, as it occurs almost unconsciously. These same situations in a second language, however, can be frustrating experiences for some language learners. Since it requires more effort, knowledge, and attention, the listening experience does not happen unconsciously, but actually is the opposite. According

to Rost, “listening is an active process, requiring both conscious attention and involvement, and therefore motivation” (as cited in Kemp, 2009, p. 385).

Celce-Murcia argues that the learning of a second language requires a big amount of meaningful and continuous input for a learner. For that reason, it can be said that listening is one of the most important parts in the language learning process. (as cited in Kemp, 2009, p.385).

For Renukadevi (2014) the listening skill is one of the most important ones in the language learning because it is called a receptive skill, which provides learners with a great source of input, and helps develop other skills (mainly speaking), along with the sound, rhythm, intonation, and stress of the language. He reinforces the importance of the listening skill by claiming: “listening awakens awareness of the language as it is a receptive skill that first develops in a human being. Learning to listen to the target language improves language ability” (Renukadevi, 2014, p. 59).

Moreover, Hedge (2000) adds: “input gained from listening can have a key role in language acquisition, so the development of effective strategies for listening becomes important not only for oracy but also for the process of acquiring new language” (p.229).

After highlighting the importance of the listening skill, it is necessary to understand how the process of this skill works. Richards explains this process consisting of two sub-processes:

Bottom-up processing

Bottom-up processing refers to the use of incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of a message. From this perspective, the process of comprehension begins with the message received, which is analyzed at successive levels of organization sounds, words, clauses, and sentences until the intended meaning is arrived at. Comprehension is thus viewed as a process of decoding.

Top-down processing

Top-down processing on the other hand, refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Background knowledge may take several forms. It may be previous knowledge about the topic discourse, it may be situational or contextual knowledge, or it may be knowledge stored in long-term memory in the form of "schemata" and "script" plans about the overall structure of events and the relationships between them. (as cited in Koichi, 2002, p.51).

These two processes are closely related, and effective learners make use of both to create meaning. Treiman (2007) suggests that bottom-up and top-down processes work together to ensure rapid and accurate performance. Furthermore, Buck claims that: "to arrive at an understanding of the message, listeners must understand the phonetic input, vocabulary, and syntax (bottom-up processing), and, at the same time, use the context of situation, general knowledge, and past experiences (top-down processing)" (as cited in Koichi, 2002, p.8).

As previously stated, students have problems when trying to develop the listening skill in the second language, especially those who do not live in the context where this language is spoken. "People have trouble with listening in their own language, not to mention in a second foreign language" (Oxford, 1993, p.244). Furthermore, Joiner explains that:

The fleetingness of speech demands vigilance on the part of the listener. Listening at least outside of the classroom or the language lab usually requires understanding the meaning on the spot and instantaneously, without any chance to rewind a tape and listen again. In contrast, with the written word, the reader can simply go back and reread a passage that has been misunderstood or that did not gain sufficient attention. (as cited in Oxford, 1993, p.244).

Taking into account the above stated, it is possible to say that the process of listening is demanding, since it requires having certain knowledge and abilities from the part of the listener. “Listening also involves understanding all sorts of reductions of sounds and blending of words. There are false starts and hesitations to be dealt with.” (Brown, 2006, p.3). Although every language learner has had problems with listening in a foreign language, this process can be more difficult for some language learners than others, due to the differences in their information-processing skills. Not all learners learn in the same way or at the same speed. If we add to this the lack of exposure to the language, the problem increases.

In a study conducted by Koichi (2002), it was reported that even when some students in Japan have been taught English for almost 10 years in primary school, high school, and university, they still have many problems with listening because they cannot understand the listening input they receive. This author says that there are two main problems, first, teachers do not provide students with adequate teaching and materials. Second, the amount of time for listening lessons is limited. Unfortunately, this is the situation we have in Colombia.

Diagnosis carried out in 2003 and 2004 in Bogotá and Cundinamarca, the Central-Andean region of the country, showed that the group of teachers from Bogotá who were tested fell in level A2. An average of 63% of those evaluated teachers proved to possess a basic level of English proficiency (levels A1 and A2); 35%, an intermediate level (B1 and B2); and only 14% demonstrated an advanced level (C1, C2) (as cited in Cárdenas, 2006, The emphasis on examinations vs. the promotion of teaching for testing section, para. 1).

It is obvious that there is a gap that need to be filled, which is why the role of teachers becomes so important. The teacher must find a way to improve their teaching methods and help solve this problem. Prior knowledge, also called “schemata” for some authors, seems to be a valuable

resource in this process. In the same way, it can be related to the term *action knowledge* from Barfield (1976) which was mentioned previously. However, Carrell and Eisterhood (1983) make a clarification, stating: “previously acquired knowledge is called the *reader’s background knowledge*, and the previously acquired knowledge structures are called *schemata*.” (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, p.556).

According to Brown (2006) “activating prior knowledge, in addition to helping comprehension, motivates students by bringing their lives into the lesson.” (p.4). Moreover, the activation of schemata helps students fill those gaps of knowledge with information they already know, so they can be contextualized. Therefore, giving them a better understanding of the input they receive. “Since foreign language learners don't have enough linguistic knowledge, they have to predict meaning by activating schemata, thereby compensating for what they cannot decode in speech.” (Koichi, 2002, p.9).

If prior knowledge is so important, teachers need to take the time to activate that type of knowledge for a better understanding of the input they receive. “A schema-building activity involves not only teachers giving students background knowledge which they are lacking, but also teachers helping them to activate schemata to fill in the gap between the listener and speaker.” (Koichi, 2002, p.17).

Along with prior knowledge, there are three types of learning strategies which are also applied in listening instruction defined as follows:

- (a) cognitive strategies, (b) metacognitive strategies, and (c) socioaffective strategies (Chamot, 1993; Oxford, Lavine, & Crookall, 1989; Vandergrift, 1997). Cognitive strategies include inferencing, resourcing, and note taking, which are unconscious interactions with the material to be learned. Metacognitive strategies involve conscious

management and regulation over learning process, like planning, concentrating, and monitoring. Socioaffective strategies include interacting with peers or management of affection to facilitate learning, such as asking questions, collaborating with classmates, and controlling stress (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989). (as cited in Rahimirad and Moini, 2015, p.2).

In short, the listening skill is really important since it provides learners with a big source of input. The process of listening is demanding for language learners, and since some students have more problems than others, teachers need to make use of prior knowledge and different types of strategies to help them solve those problems.

The Influence of Being an Autonomous Learner in the Development of Listening Skill

If we recapitulate what was said previously, we have two important statements. The first one is that according to authors like (Dickinson, Holec, and Little) being an autonomous learner can be beneficial for students, because they are independent and do not need the supervision of teachers all the time, and they can make decisions that affect positively their learning process. But as some scholars like (Barfiel, Kumaravadivelu, and Little) agree, students cannot become autonomous learners if teachers do not foster this behavior through different strategies that take into account student's needs and interests.

The second statement is that according to authors like (Cross, Graham, Joiner, Renukadevi, and Rost) listening is a very important skill in the process of learning a second language. Due to its complexity, it can be demanding. Adding to this fact the lack of exposure to the language, it results in one of the most problematic skills for foreign language students, which is why teachers need to use different strategies to find a possible solution to this problem.

As stated above, on the one hand, we have the advantages of being an autonomous learner. On the other hand, we have a problem with the correct development of the listening skill in foreign language students. If we put them together, the obvious solution to the problem could be using autonomous learning to make the listening process more effective, and have an autonomous listening process that can help improve this skill. But how can this be done? How can teachers promote autonomous listening? And what are the effects?

According to Cross (2004) “learning to listen in a second language (L2) essentially still takes place in a classroom environment. Teachers typically manipulate and control the text as they see fit to enable learners to listen a number of times, complete the given comprehension task(s), and produce the necessary response.” (p.8). This means that students barely have opportunities to put in practice their listening skill outside the classroom, which is why teachers need to find strategies to make the listening process in students be more effective. Some of the ways to do so is through metacognitive strategies and the use of technology to complement them.

Starting with metacognitive strategies Hismanoglu (2000) says:

It can be stated that metacognitive is a term to express executive function, strategies which require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Among the main metacognitive strategies, it is possible to include advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation. (Hismanoglu, 2000, Metacognitive Strategies section, para. 1).

“The metacognitive strategies train the language Learner to cope with the demands of listening.” (Renukadevi, 2014, p.62). In the same way, Guo (2002) in favor of metacognitive

strategies claims: "based on the essence of meta-cognition theory and the characteristics of college English teaching, the cultivation of students' meta-cognition is favorable for the improvement of their ability to learn English listening autonomously." (p.2446). Furthermore, he adds that metacognitive strategies help students set goals, supervise their progress and assess their learning process; accelerating their listening performance. In other words, metacognitive strategies raise students' awareness of their own learning process and allow them to plan, control, and evaluate it.

The following are some of the most important metacognitive strategies:

- directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
- self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
- self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success. (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000, Metacognitive strategies section, para. 2).

Little (1999) says that for developing students' metacognitive capacities, it is important that they negotiate issues related to their learning process with teachers "Negotiation is rooted in learners' metacognitive capacity since it requires that they talk about talk and think about thinking. According to a social-interactive view, collaborative learning activity, or group work, is the obvious way of developing learners' metacognitive capacity." (p. 84).

The use of metacognitive strategies seems to have good effects according to some empirical studies like (Guo, Cross, Mareschal, Goh, and Taib) showing the relationship between metacognitive strategies and English listening learning ability. The results include independent

learning, improvements in awareness, interest, and confidence and most importantly, improvement in students' English listening comprehension.

Those studies show the following activities in the metacognitive strategies used by researchers:

- The use of journals, anxiety/motivation charts, and questionnaires for learners to review their knowledge of listening.
- Pre- and post-listening reflections.
- Setting reading purposes and goals before listening activity.
- Checking if the goals were accomplished or not.

Besides the metacognitive strategies, the use of technology can be very beneficial in promoting students' autonomous listening. Robin supports the use of technology and claims that: "web 2.0 technologies are now of sufficient sophistication to enable such learners to independently access and exploit listening material from within an authentic L2-mediated environment" (as cited in Cross, 2014, p.9).

Cross (2014) makes emphasis in the use of podcasts as a tool for promoting the autonomous listening skill, stating: "In particular, podcasts provide an up-to-date, varied and extensive online source of audio and video broadcasts for learners wishing to improve their language learning beyond the confines of the classroom." (p.9). With this statement, it is possible to say that podcasts are an excellent source that provide foreign language students with input that helps in the lack of exposure to the second language.

First, it is important to understand what a podcast is. Lafferty & Walch (2006) define podcasts as a "series of digital audio and video recordings uploaded on the web with the aid of Rapid Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. RSS feeds allow listeners to download their favorite

podcasts using podcatcher software like iTunes.” (as cited in Hassan & Hoon, 2012, p.128). In other words, a podcast is video or audio recording available on the web with easy access. It means that students can subscribe to the podcasts, and the new episodes will be downloaded automatically when they are available. Also, they do not have to visit many web pages to find a podcast that they like, in platforms like iTunes, they can find many types of podcasts according to their interests.

According to Mc Guillan (2007) some of the most important advantages of podcasts are portability and versatility. Starting with portability, students can listen to a podcast anytime, anywhere; whether they are at home, walking, in a car, bike, at the gym, they can use an mp3 portable device or a computer to put their listening skill in practice. Versatility refers to the amount of podcasts available. Since podcasts are made mainly to entertain and inform L1 speakers, there are hundreds of podcasts about many topics that can fit the second language learners’ interests. However, the number of podcasts created as a language learner resource for L2 learners is increasing. (Robin, 2007). The podcasts created to help students learn a new language can be offered as semi-authentic or non-authentic materials. Examples of those podcasts are: www.eslpod.com and www.tu-ingles.com.

Scholars like Hegelheimer & O’Bryan, and Koichi, carried out studies using podcasts to promote autonomous listening, and some of the findings were that “the learner was able to enhance her metacognitive capacity and impose sequence and structure on her listening outside the classroom, broaden her view of what listening comprehension in an L2 entails, and show some signs of performance improvements.” (as cited in Koichi, 2002, p.14). In the same way, it was stated that “learners responded positively to the podcast integration, and the instructor stated

that the podcasts were a useful way to extend limited class time and expose learners to a wider variety of English speakers.” (as cited in Koichi, 2002, p.24).

Finally, it is important to show how teachers can use podcast in class to help learners develop their listening skill. Authors like (Guikema, Hegelheimer & O’Bryan, McBride, and Rosell-Aguilar) make suggestions and key recommendations for teachers to follow. Among them, the most important ones include:

- Select shorter length podcasts that represent a variety of speakers and are accompanied by supporting material.
- Explore and understand the discourse structure and patterns of different podcasts.
- Initially focus learners on extracting meaning, not on detailed understanding.
- Include repeated listening to short sections of text to develop bottom-up skills.
- Contribute additional information such as cultural insights.
- Encourage learners to keep journals of their podcast listening experiences.

In short, as some empirical studies have shown, the use of activities based on metacognitive strategies can be really useful in the development of an autonomous listening skill. Along with this, the use of Web 2.0 as a complement, especially the use of podcasts, can help solve the problem of lack of exposure to input in the second language.

Pedagogical Proposal

Taking into account that according to many authors like (Nunan, Little, and Holec) who support the idea that autonomous learning can be beneficial not only for students but also for teachers in the process of learning a foreign language, it is important to highlight the advantages of implementing and fostering autonomous learning in the classroom. When students become

autonomous learners, they are more capable than others of improving not only the listening skill, but also every aspect in the development of the foreign language.

Given that in the context of Colombia, teachers tend to perceive that most of students have a lack of motivation to develop autonomous work in a context different from the classroom where they are not supervised, it is necessary that teachers take action on the matter and do something to change this situation and make the process of learning more effective and accurate.

It is also a matter of preoccupation for teachers, that students struggle when trying to improve their listening skill. In our context, English is learned as a foreign language, students therefore have limited opportunities to put it in practice as the ones who learn English as a second language. If we add to this situation the fact that they do not practice the language if they do not have someone to supervise them, we have a bigger problem. However, the problem seems to be not only on the students' part, but also on the teachers. According to a study made by Castaño and Londoño (2012) many English classes in high schools in Pereira are imparted in Spanish, and teachers still use traditional methods such as Grammar Translation Method and Teacher centered approach. Unfortunately, this situation is not quite different in other places of Colombia. Furthermore, according to a study made by The European Education Information Network, schools in Europe spend an average time of eight years dedicated to the study of foreign languages, with 5 to 9 hours a week, making a total of 720 hours, which is enough exposure to have a good development of the language. In contrast, in Colombia we spend an average time of 6 years with 3 hours a week, making a total of 270 hours. It is clear that there is not enough exposure to the foreign language. (as cited in Sanchez & Obando, 2008, Exposure to the language section, para. 5). The panorama seems not to be very promising when the

government with its National Program of Bilingualism, aims to have proficient English speakers by the year 2019. (Estándares Básicos de Competencias, MEN, 2006).

There is a need to improve the teaching and learning methodologies in order to achieve this goal, since the statistics taken from the Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (ICFES), which is the governmental entity in charge of the evaluation of the students from primary, high school and university. The ICFES' test shows that the students keep obtaining low results in English, and this issue could be related to the less effectiveness of the traditional methods that teachers still use. (Castano & Londoño, 2012, p.7).

Taking into account the above, the responsibility on the teacher in our context is really big. It not only implies being prepared and up to date when it comes to teaching methods, but also trying to make change, and with a series of different language learning strategies and activities, moving towards a type of education in which students make decisions that positively affect and actively take part in their own process of learning. Graham (1997) claims that if students use language learning strategies that teachers provide, they can depend less on the teacher, therefore becoming autonomous learners. In the end, it not only strengthens the students' listening autonomous learning ability, but also improves their overall learning outcomes.

As it was said previously, in classrooms that prioritize the development of autonomous learning, teachers make students develop activities that allow them to reflect on, assess and evaluate their own learning processes.

The following are some strategies explained by Wenden that teachers can use to promote autonomous learning,

1. Self-reports. A good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies. Teachers assign students a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This self-report is called introspective, as learners are asked to introspect on their learning. In this case, 'the [introspective] self-report is a verbalization of one's stream of consciousness' Introspective reports are assumed to provide information on the strategies learners are using at the time of the report. (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000, Self-reports section, para.1). Another type of report is the retrospective self-report, which can be Semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews can focus on finding information about how students feel on a certain skill (listening, speaking, reading, etc.), problems that may appear, and ways to find a solution. If students do not feel ready to speak while being interviewed, they can write their answers or the teacher can make them develop structured questionnaires, which is a series of explicit questions that students simply respond with agreement or disagreement, true or false, etc. (Thanasoulas, 2000).

2. Diaries and Evaluation Sheets. Diaries and evaluation sheets, offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions. This is one example of how a student's diary looks like:

Dear Diary,

These first few days have been terrible. I studied English for eight years just think, eight years, but I only learned a lot of grammar. I can't speak a word. I don't dare. I can't express myself in the right way, so I am afraid to speak.

The other day I started watching TV, so I could get accustomed to the sound. I don't understand TV news very well only a few words. I can't get the main point. In school it's easy to understand, but I can't understand the people in the stores.

What can I do?

Yours Truly,

Impatient.

In the same way, evaluation sheets allow students to reflect on the expectations they have at the beginning of the course, and the goals they have achieved at the end of it. They can answer questions such as: what do I want to do this year? And what do you feel you know now that you didn't know before? (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000, Diaries and Evaluation Sheets part, para. 2).

In the same way, Dam (2011) gives very useful suggestions for teachers who want to promote autonomy in class.

The role of the teacher. The role of teachers is to establish an environment in which students feel confident to take responsibility for their own learning. She suggests that the teacher informs his students about the activities developed in class and tells them what he is doing, why he is doing it, and which results he expects from what he does.

The organization of the classroom. Forming groups has given good results when fostering autonomy in class. It promotes group work, peer-tutoring, independence from the teacher, and facilitates interaction between learners, since they feel more confident talking to a partner, rather than speaking in front of the class.

The use of logbooks, portfolios, and posters. Logbooks full with notes and illustrations from the lessons, and portfolios full of essays, tests, stories, etc. are very useful for students because it allows them to have something physical with a documentation which can be really

useful to reflect on their learning process and the progress they have had over the course.

Regarding the content, she makes some suggestions that teachers can have their students done as follows:

- Start the lesson by entering day and date in your logbook
- During a lesson, enter step by step what you are doing, i.e. which activities you are involved in
- At the end of a lesson enter homework to be done as well as an evaluation of the day which could include things I have learned.

Posters are placed on top of each other under various headings:

- Plans (for lessons, for group work – who does what and with whom)
- Ideas (for activities to be undertaken, for homework to choose from)
- Things to remember / demands (good expressions, grammar rules, an overview of dates for handing in things)
- Things we have experienced (criteria for a good talk, a good presentation, a good group work) (Dam, 2011, p.47).

Finally, Kavaliauskiene (2002) proposes two activities to promote autonomous learning.

1. Checking and Correcting Homework. This activity promotes autonomy, cooperation, correction, and assessment. It can be done in small groups or with the whole class. It is a very motivating activity, since students love playing the role of teachers.

Procedure: Ask one of the students to start the activity by appointing a speaker who will provide an answer to the first question. If the answer is correct, this student asks somebody else to answer the next question, and so on. If the answer is wrong, the

teacher's role is taken by any student who provides the right answer. (Kavaliauskiene, 2002, checking and correcting homework, para.2).

Teacher's role: The teacher monitors students' performance and only interferes when there is a difficult question, and the student is unable to give the right answer. However, it is suggested that instead of giving the students the answer, he gives them some clues that help them come up with the right answer.

Tips: With lower levels or if students do not feel comfortable with their English, it is advisable that teachers allow them to speak in their L1. The purpose of the activity is that students become familiar with it and gain confidence to speak the next time. A variation of this activity is having students interchange their homework and corrected, it promotes peer-correcting.

- 2. Student-produced Tests.** Tests produced by students is a very motivating activity. It encourages self-assessment, self-study and reflection on the knowledge they have chosen to put on their tests. Those tests can be adapted depending on the students' level and the skills the teacher wants them to be evaluated in. The activity can be developed in pairs or small groups.

Procedure: Students previously develop a worksheet on a certain topic and hand it out to their partners, they set the time for developing the test and provide help if needed.

Teacher's role: The teacher only supervises the activity and intervenes when help is needed. It is important that he or she checks the worksheets developed by students to correct any mistake before they are handed out. It is also really important that teachers guide students on how to develop their tests.

Tips: Tests can also be presented on transparencies or slides if the materials are available. They can be adapted according to the students' level; going from simple grammatical questions to open-ended questions.

Metacognitive strategies for teaching listening

As it was said previously, metacognitive strategies help students develop autonomous listening. Since they are capable of reflecting on their learning process; planning, controlling, and evaluating it without the full supervision of teachers. Renukadevi (2014) agrees:

The metacognitive strategies train the language learner to cope with the demands of listening. It is quite evident that metacognitive strategies make their learning more effective, hence, they are able to maximize the information received and thus this can be used to improve their listening skills. (p.62).

Pre-listening. It is important to remember the influence of activating students' prior knowledge, since it helps them have a better understanding of the input they receive. When teachers provide students with context, they prepare mentally for what they are about to hear. Teachers can also discuss the topic, provide students with readings, visual aids or vocabulary to make the understanding easier.

The following are strategies proposed by Koichi (2002) during the listening part.

Listening for main ideas. Students only look for main ideas without worrying for specific details. Teachers can ask questions such as: "Where are the speakers talking?" "What are they talking about?" "Why are they talking?"

Listening for specific information. Students are required to answer specific questions about the material. They can be asked questions such as: "What time did the event happen?"

“Who are they talking about?” If the material is audiovisual, such as a movie, the type of questions can be even more specific. Teachers can ask not only about the situations, but also about the environment where they are happening.

Listening to predict. The most important thing in this strategy is that during a listening activity, students try to predict what would come next when they do not understand what they are listening to. After listening to a conversation, teachers can ask questions such as “Can you guess what words will be said next?”, after watching a silent film, they can ask: “By observing speakers' gestures and facial expressions, can you guess what words are being said?”

Listening to make inferences. Students can infer information in a listening activity. For example, a child could say to his mother: “I’m going to play tennis”, the mother’s response is “it’s cold outside, isn’t it?” The most important thing here is that students can infer that the mother does not want his son to go out, even when it is not explicitly said. Teachers can elicit those responses by asking questions such as: “What does the mother mean?” “Why did she say that?”

Using non-verbal cues. Students should be able to pay attention to paralinguistic signals such as body language, places where the conversations take place, etc. To do so, it is necessary that the material is a video, as it is impossible to do it with a recording.

Post-listening. Activities after listening are a perfect way to integrate other skills such as writing or speaking. Teachers can make their students develop their own dialogues, write or give their opinions about what they listened to and share it with their partners.

Using podcasts. As Cross (2014) claims, podcasts provide a good source for teachers to go beyond the contents of traditional textbooks with artificial and reduced varieties of English, and

mundane topics. Moreover, Podcasts offer a huge variety of authentic, semi-authentic, non-authentic audio or audiovisual materials, with many topics that teachers can adapt and integrate to their classroom, according to the students' necessities. Besides, with previous direction, students can explore podcasts on their own. Whether they are at home or anywhere else, they can take advantage of them and be exposed to the target language, the culture, and enhance their listening skills.

The following is an activity which uses an episode of the English as a Second Language Podcast, applying metacognitive strategies.

Procedure: Teacher arranges students in couples or in groups.

Teacher's role: The teacher will intervene to ask questions that elicit information from students, and if they ask for help when developing the activity.

Pre-listening: During this part, the teacher asks his students questions about the topic "going to a restaurant" such as "How often do you go to a restaurant?", "What kind of food do you like?", "What restaurant do you like in Pasto?", "When was the last time you went there?", "Who did you go with?" among others. They can also discuss those questions in their groups. This allows students to be contextualized, so they can remember everything they know about this topic, including social issues and vocabulary they may know.

The teacher gives his students a purpose for listening, by providing them with questions that they can answer after listening to the recording. Either they can be provided in a worksheet or written in the board.

Listening for main ideas: The teacher can ask questions such as: “What was the recording about?”, “What situation was the character involved in?”, “Did the character feel good in the situation?” “Why or why not?”

Listening for specific information: The teacher can ask questions such as: “Was the character alone or with anyone else?”, “What was the name of the place where he went?”, “What was the name of the waiter?”, “Who greeted the character when he walked in?” “What did he order?”

The teacher plays the recording one or two times according to their students’ needs.

Listening to predict: While students listen to the podcast, the teacher could stop the recording and ask “What word will come next?” For example, after listening the hostess said: “your waiter will be with you shortly” students can infer what word will come after the sentence “The waiter came up to the table a few minutes” the obvious inference is the word “later”.

Listening to make inferences: When the students listen to the sentence “your waiter will be with you shortly” said by the hostess, the teacher can ask his students questions such as: “What does the hostess mean?” “How the character should react after listening to that sentence?” Students will probably infer that the hostess said that because she wants the character to wait a moment while the waiter comes and waits his table, meanwhile, they will have to decide what they want to order, although it is not explicitly said.

Post-listening: The teacher can make their students write the answers to the questions and discuss them. They can also develop a short dialogue in their groups about going to a restaurant. Moreover, the teacher can have the students correct each other’s worksheets.

Notes: The activity can be adapted to different contexts and students' level, using different podcasts available which take into account students' interests and needs. The teacher can make students develop a homework activity like the previous one or have a discussion with the second part of the podcast available in the web page of the podcast.

The teacher can also encourage their students to listen to other podcasts about a topic that they like and have them report what they listened to. As it was mentioned before, students feel motivated and engaged in an activity when they can relate to it. It is highly recommended that these experiences are replicated in a Colombian educational context, since they are suitable for teachers who want to promote autonomous learning, therefore, enhancing autonomous listening skills.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to show the influence of autonomous learning in the development of listening skill of foreign language students.

As it was shown in this work, the development of autonomy in students can be very beneficial, since it allows them to take charge of their own learning process. They can set goals, use different learning strategies, monitor their process, decide if the goals were achieved or not and make any changes that seem necessary.

Since in general, not all the students are willing to take charge of their learning process, it depends on teachers to create an environment where autonomy is fostered, using different tools and strategies considering their learning styles, interests and needs.

If teachers want to foster autonomous learning among their students the first requirement is that they are autonomous learners and the second is that students must have a high range of motivation, highlighting the intrinsic motivation.

To foster autonomous learning, teachers need to provide students with contextualized activities that are related to their reality. The use of learning agendas, retrospective self-reports and activities such as students-produced tests and checking and correcting homework can be very beneficial in this process.

In this paper it was also possible to explain that teachers need to find strategies to enhance the listening skill. Since it is a receptive skill, it provides students with large amount of input that is crucial in the development of other skills, especially speaking.

For some students, the development of listening skill can be difficult and sometimes frustrating since it requires more effort, knowledge, and attention in understanding the message they are receiving.

Prior knowledge and schemata can help students to have a better understanding of the input they receive, and fill the gaps they have in linguistic knowledge. Therefore, teachers should take the time to implement them in their lessons, so listening comprehension is more effective.

According to authors like Cross (2004), listening in a second language usually takes place in the classroom, and taking into account the context of Colombia where students learn English as a foreign language, they barely have chances to receive input in the second language. That is when the use of metacognitive strategies and technology can help.

Finally, in a context like Colombia where there is a need to improve students' proficiency with English, and also educators' teaching methods, the use of metacognitive strategies raises students' awareness which allow them to plan, control, and evaluate their learning process, resulting in an autonomous listening process. In the same way, the use of podcasts offers a good source of input that helps students with the lack of exposure to the second language. They are

therefore given more opportunities to put into practice the listening skill outside the classroom without the supervision of a tutor.

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