# DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH A VIRTUAL EAP COURSE AT UNIVERSITY

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## Developing Learner Autonomy through a Virtual EAP Course at University[i]

This article centres on students' participation in the virtual EAP course "English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web" and reports on a qualitative study that aims at describing their profile as autonomous learners. This course, with a strong emphasis on the use of Internet resources for language learning, was devised with two main aims: to help students develop their language and communication skills and, especially, to foster learner autonomy, a requisite in distance learning.

To this end, students' views and attitudes on language-related matters as well as the actions they undertook related to the management of their own learning were analysed in an attempt to provide an accurate picture of their capacity to direct their own learning. The results show that students are able to perform a number of self-directed learning actions and to express a variety of views on language and learning. They can also use the metalanguage presented in course activities in order to create their own definitions and come to conclusions on their role as language learners. The paper concludes with some implications and points to further research that may arise from these findings.

## 1. Introduction

The widespread use of ICT in education has encouraged university teachers and course designers to devise virtual courses that can meet the specific needs of students of different contexts. Within this trend, the *Departament d'Universitats, Recerca i Societat de la Informació* of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* has set up the *Intercampus Program*, a joint offer of virtual elective courses in eight Catalan universities. One of the courses offered by the *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya* is "*English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web*", mainly intended to suit general academic needs of students from different backgrounds.

Precisely, the heterogeneity of the students has determined the main objective of this EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course: to promote learner autonomy. Thus, this course is motivated by two main considerations. On the one hand, university students need to have a command of English to succeed in the academic world. On the other hand, we believe that students can benefit from becoming more autonomous, that is, from developing skills to control their learning process and getting involved in learning about language. As Ellis and Sinclair (1989) suggest, learners who develop self-directed learning strategies—related to initiating

and controlling their learning process—can continue learning outside the classroom. This can prove to be very useful for university students who need to keep on developing academic and language skills to succeed in academic contexts.

For the purpose of attaining the objectives of the course, we assume that the Internet is an appropriate medium and a powerful tool for language learning (see e.g., Sperling 1997; Benson 2001; Warschauer et al. 2000). The course is delivered through an intranet—the virtual classroom—which includes e-mail communication, shared spaces (like forums), and lists of electronic documents and course materials. The Internet is also a provider of resources of which the learner can take great advantage. The Web offers a wide variety of materials for language learners, most of which are highly interactive and especially useful for self-access.

The aim of this article is thus to explore how a virtual EAP course, which relies on the use of Internet resources for language learning and is specially designed to promote learner autonomy, can help university students take control of the learning process. Our views on autonomy are discussed, and a definition of the term is formulated, on which some of the tenets of the course are based. The article mainly focuses on the study of the students' profile as autonomous learners. This profile is obtained by analysing the views and attitudes they express on language and learning as well as the actions they report to undertake in order to direct their own learning process.

## 2. Towards a Working Definition of Learner Autonomy

A course that caters for a variety of competence levels, needs and interests and whose main aim is to foster learner autonomy has to provide for the skills that students need in order to take control of their own learning process. Thus, a working definition of learner autonomy is needed and the skills involved need to be identified.

Taking responsibility for one's own learning is a recurrent notion in works on autonomy (Holec 1981; Dickinson 1987; Little 1991; Benson 2001). Specifically, Holec (1981, 3) defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", which involves making decisions about different aspects of the language learning process (determining objectives, monitoring progress, or evaluating performance, among others). Along similar lines, Little (1991, 4) views autonomy as "a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". However, he adds an essential psychological dimension, which entails that "the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning".

For the purpose of this course, we adopt Holec's definition as our main tenet, yet we intend to elaborate on this basic definition, since, if the aim of the course is to foster learner autonomy, we should keep in mind those specific skills involved in our conception of the term. We assume that autonomy entails ability, a specific attitude, and special behaviour. The autonomous learner displays some ability to direct the course of his/her learning, which implies being able to make decisions concerning course management, organisation and content. Besides, a special attitude is expected from autonomous learners, who actively engage in the learning process. In this sense, learning about language can help students take informed decisions and make the most of their learning as highly skilled learners. In practice, autonomy also involves certain behaviour on the part of learners. They need to be reflective about their own learning, taking the initiative to explore, find possible solutions and contrast results. Thus, according to our views, learner autonomy is ultimately reflected through a series of skills that we seek to foster in the course.

These include assessing needs, establishing objectives, monitoring progress, evaluating and choosing materials, reflecting on learning, and providing self-assessment.

If one of the main aims of the course is to help students become more effective learners and take on responsibility for their own learning, some learner training will be required (Ellis and Sinclair 1989, 2). Students need to be familiar with learning strategies so that they can find out which of them are more appropriate to direct their own learning, that is, to help them focus on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn. As for learning strategies in relation to distance learning courses or distributed environments, Hurd (2000, 63) points out that "conscious selection and self-directed involvement, both features of strategies … are also characteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance, therefore to the needs of distance language learners". She adds "for distance learners, left to a large extent to their own devices, it could be that metacognitive knowledge and development of metacognitive skills are not only an essential part of effective learning but also a pre-requisite to it". In line with this, we believe that if students are to become more effective learners, emphasis should be placed on training them to develop the ability to make choices about learning, as well as to become more reflective, critical and willing to experiment. In keeping with Ellis and Sinclair's (1989, 2) views, we believe that students need information about language, the learning process, and about themselves as language learners, to become aware of language as well as of learning techniques and processes. Therefore, the course aims to provide students with resources, study guides, specific activities and teacher's guidance, with the purpose of making students resourceful and actively engaged. Moreover, in this EAP context, the learner has to develop certain study skills (Jordan 1997) which can be enhanced by the development of study competence skills. This more general study capacity, which includes cognitive and affective factors, such as self-confidence, self-awareness, the ability to think critically and creatively, and independence of mind (Waters and Waters 2001), can help students perform different learning tasks efficiently and with confidence.

Learner autonomy calls for a reappraisal of teachers and learners' roles (Lynch 2001, 394), and especially in a distance learning situation. As students are not constrained by time or space, and do not have regular classroom contact, they need to decide on the scheduling of activities. Therefore, the student has to take the initiative and become the manager of his/her own learning process; in fact, we approach the learning process from the student's perspective, in which he/she has a more prominent role, whereas the teacher assumes a subsidiary role. Voller (1997, 99-105) suggests that the two main functions traditionally assigned to the teacher—those of manager and instructor—have been revised in autonomous language learning and, accordingly, we view the role of the teacher as a facilitator, counsellor and resource. In this EAP course, the teacher gives support to learners, motivating, encouraging them and making them aware of the benefits of becoming more independent. The teacher also provides guidance and is ready to give information about learning routes and resources if the students need help. Finally, the teacher is seen as a resource in that he or she can provide learners with a wide range of activities from which the student will choose. Yet this study focuses only on the learner's role, and a detailed analysis of the teacher's role is beyond the scope of this study.

With a more active role, students are involved in two activities traditionally considered part of the teacher's role: syllabus design, and evaluation or assessment (Ellis and Sinclair 1989). As mentioned before, the course aims to develop students' skills to take informed decisions about their own learning paths and to evaluate their own progress. In this respect, teachers and learners negotiate course contents and methodology, and learners make decisions according to their own views and

principles with the teacher's support. Specifically, students create their own syllabus and perform the tasks according to how they interpret them—which may not necessarily coincide with the materials designer or the teacher's intention—and, at the same time, fill them in with their own contents. The teacher accepts learner-guided tasks as a natural aspect of a course intended to endow students with the capacity to make decisions about their own learning process and, thus, relinquishes authority over the course.

The tool used to accomplish the main objective of the course, to develop learner autonomy, is the Internet. Thus, course activities have been designed around Internet resources, which are especially appropriate for self-access, as they are intended for autonomous learners. The use of the Internet also offers additional advantages: it is motivating, dynamic, and contains resources for communicating with users worldwide, among others. This tool is considered particularly suitable to our methodology in which we try to promote a wide range of learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective.

The potential that the Internet offers for language learning has been highlighted in the recent literature (Chun and Plass 2000; Teeler and Gray 2000; Warschauer et al. 2000). As Warschauer et al. claim (2000, 7), the Internet provides "authenticity, literacy, interaction, vitality and empowerment" to the English classroom. Indeed, the dynamic nature of the Internet, together with the wide range of materials and resources it offers, makes it a valuable tool for language learning. At the same time, the relationship between the use of the Internet and learner autonomy has already been suggested by Little (1997, 235-236), who equates the Internet with a "'virtual' self-access centre" and states that students can benefit from the vast amount of resources present in the Internet, only if they are aware of their role as learners and are equipped with the tools to make the most of those resources for language learning. Similarly, Warschauer et al. (2000) claim that successful results depend on how the Internet is used. Along the same lines, Kenning (1996, 128) points out that "the provision of choice and opportunities is not enough by itself in that it does no more than set up conditions compatible with autonomy. It is necessary to go beyond that first step and, through learner training, enable students to make informed choices". In keeping with these views, in *English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web* participants are trained to use the Internet for authentic communication in English so that they can get involved in real situations. The Internet is also used as the main source of materials and, as such, it provides resources and authentic data for course activities. As Slaouti (2002, 111) suggests, the dynamic nature of the Internet and the immediacy it offers to access information can promote learners' confidence in their study skills and in their ability to perform independently.

## 3. Students' Profile as Autonomous Learner: A Study of Their Views on Language and Learning

The concept of learner autonomy presented in this article is based on the assumption that students' work is guided by the ideas and principles that they themselves have set. Thus, in order for students to become autonomous, they should be able to create a general framework in which learning takes place and which, in turn, allows them to manage their learning process according to their own views.

Thus, in order to describe students' profile as autonomous learners, we carried out a study to analyse the views and attitudes on language and learning they manifested in written form, using the Internet resources that were the basis of the course. In turn, these ideas expressed by students themselves constitute the

framework which should guide their learning process. The data for this study were gathered from student work on activities specially designed to foster learner autonomy, done as part of the course *English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web*, during the fall term of the academic year 2001-2002.

## 3.1. Subjects

The subjects that took part in our study were 29 students from eight Catalan universities, doing a variety of degree courses, who had enrolled in the course "*English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web*", taught in a distance mode through a virtual campus. It was a heterogeneous group made up of students from different backgrounds with general academic needs, though prone to the use of technology-based learning environments. Because this EAP course was designed so that students could choose their own learning objectives, focusing mainly on study skills, students' needs varied greatly across the group. As there were no specific language requirements, students had different levels of competence in English. However, this group consisted of highly motivated students who liked (and presumably were good at) learning English, knew what distance learning involves, and—given the nature of the course—accepted that they should work independently of the teacher, i.e. that they needed to be autonomous learners. It should be remembered that those particular students had enrolled—and thus shown special interest—in a pilot program, "Intercampus", offered outside their own university.

## 3.2. Data

The data for this study were obtained from students' actions, views and attitudes related to language and learning, expressed by students themselves through course activities specially designed to promote learner autonomy. In this sense, we consider that for students to be fully autonomous, they should be allowed to generate their own ideas and principles, which will constitute the framework for learning to take place. For this reason, course activities were intended to encourage learners to do specific actions associated with autonomous learning as well as to discuss and share their views on language and learning. Specifically, the aim of course activities was to encourage students:

- to reflect on the learning process by expressing and sharing ideas about language and learning, through virtual debates that took place in an electronic forum.
- to use resources, strategies, and techniques to manage students' own learning (e.g. evaluation of material, assessment, etc).
- to create more learning opportunities by maximising their exposure to real language use and by communicating in English in authentic situations.
- to make the most of Internet resources for language learning, especially as regards academic needs.

This study analyses the views on language and learning expressed by students in a sample of course activities and debates intended to promote learner autonomy, both in terms of undertaking specific actions and generating their own ideas. The sample activities analysed reflect the general objectives mentioned above. The following table summarises the specific orientation of these activities and debates and includes the code assigned to each activity:

| TASKS ANALYSED | TASK CODE | SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES |
|---|---|---|
| Self-access learning plan | (SA) | To construct a plan for monitoring one's own learning process. |
| Grammar safari[ii] | (GS) | To analyse samples of real language in order to investigate and learn more about grammar. |
| Using communication resources to improve language skills | (CR) | To use Internet communication resources to exchange information about language. |
| Debates | (DB) | To express and share ideas about online learning, the use of the Internet in language learning, what makes a good language learner, and what has been learnt during the course. |

As this course took place in a virtual learning environment, through the Internet, both students' activities and contributions to debates were expressed in written form. They consisted of electronic documents and e-mail messages sent either to the teacher's mailbox or to the classroom forum (i.e. an electronic mailbox shared by all class participants, like a newsgroup), depending on the nature of each activity.

### 3.3. Analysis

The data for this study were analysed qualitatively, identifying and categorising the references related to learner autonomy that students made in their electronic messages and course work. Specifically, we looked at the actions students reported to have undertaken—or that they had the intention to undertake in the future—as regards language learning as well as at the views and attitudes they expressed. Actions refer not only to specific activities that students can be seen to undertake through course work, but also to the intentions that they explicitly express. In contrast, by views and attitudes, we refer both to students' opinions on or disposition towards language and learning as well as to their mental representations of different aspects of learning. By analysing their actions and views related to language and learning, our objective was to describe students' profile as autonomous learners. Given the qualitative nature of the study, we used *ad hoc* categories, related to the above parameters, that emerged from the analysis of the data.

### 3.4. Results and discussion

Our qualitative analysis was based on the broad parameters that we used to find out how students revealed their autonomous behaviour: specific actions, on the one hand, and views and attitudes, on the other. Both actions and views that arise from students' own independent decisions help us draw a complete profile of our students' autonomous behaviour, according to the notion of learner autonomy held in this paper. Within this framework, we identified the following categories, summarised in the table below, which also includes an example of each category.

According to the learning-to-learn orientation of the course, these categories derive, to a great extent, from course activities (e.g. constructing a self-access learning plan or participating in debates discussing aspects of language and learning). The interest of this study lies in finding out what specific actions students undertake and what attitudes they manifest as they develop or show their learning

autonomy. Therefore, this study focuses on what students say and do as regards language and learning.

| | |
|---|---|
| **ACTIONS** | **Analysing needs and establishing objectives**<br>*"I need to listen or improve my comprehension and I find listening difficult".* (SA) |
| | **Focusing on specific language areas**<br>*"The structure I would like to focus on is: the use of which/what and as/like, mistakes I make very often".* (GS) |
| | **Making decisions about methodology**<br>*"the grammar says:* we say which when we are thinking about a small number and we use what in other situations. *Let's see it in different kinds of texts".* (GS) |
| | **Applying skills and strategies**<br>*"I'm used to working with keywords and search engines, as a librarian, but I'd never used them to search for grammar use of words. I've found it very interesting and I'll do it more often".* (GS) |
| | **Evaluating progress and results**<br>*"At least, I've got used to writing long texts without lots of problems".* (DB) |
| | **Expressing intentions about future learning actions**<br>*"I have discovered many different resources that we can use freely through the Internet at any time. Therefore, I can continue my learning process after this course" .* (DB) |
| **VIEWS AND ATTITUDES** | **General attitude towards language and learning**<br>*"Also, after having done this course I think that I will feel more self-confident when I read academic texts".* (DB) |
| | **Expressing critical views about some language teaching practices**<br>*"It is important for students to learn the language in a natural way, and, if teachers tell them that the word "just" is used in a simple context (present perfect), then, when they are discovering the "real world", they will notice that what they have learnt is not true, because if they read an article and they find that they just can't understand the word in that context, they will feel sad".* (GS) |
| | **Analysing distance learning**<br>*"The fact of not knowing who you are talking to also brings some advantages and disadvantages. If you can see people, there is more human contact, more feeling. With online learning, we can only see written words (unless you've got a camera to do video-conferences)".* (DB) |

| | Expressing opinions about the potential of Internet-based resources for language learning |
|---|---|
| | *"As there are lots of web pages that can be visited, I think the ways of learning a foreign language using the Internet are infinitely. We can find two types of sources in our learning: the sites especially designed to learn a language and the general sites that are written in that language".* (DB) |
| | **Describing the profile of the good language learner** *"We have read and discussed about the learning process. Although it may seem useless, I believe that it is very important to be aware of the way you learn and how you can improve. Therefore, learning new tips about how to learn and becoming a more active learner can help us make the most of all the efforts we do to learn a language".* (DB) |

The analysis of the data shows that students take actions during the learning process, based on independent decision-making, such as focusing on specific language areas they wish to work on. This particular action, which was elicited in one of the activities, is carried out by students either from the analysis of their own needs and weaknesses or out of their curiosity about language and their need to go beyond grammar explanations. In this case, some students who are particularly alert to language notice discrepancies between real language use and traditional grammar explanations, and so manifest their intention to investigate language use, as in the example below:

> *I have chosen the particle* just *because when English is taught, this word is shown only with an aspect (the present perfect form), but looking at the articles, at the natural and real English I have **noticed** some things* (GS).

When it comes to analysing needs and determining learning objectives, rather than carrying out a real analysis, what students actually do is to express their own perceptions of difficulties or aspects they consider important and must be learnt (e.g. vocabulary, phrasal verbs, etc). The fact that students highlight certain language points may be influenced by the emphasis teachers have placed on those aspects in previous language courses. Besides, the learning objectives that students establish are often too broad to be really useful, as they only mention general skills or language areas (e.g. practising speaking, improving grammar, etc). In some cases, when learners find it difficult to articulate or narrow down the kind of action they decide to undertake, they make decisions under teacher guidance. This kind of guidance consists in posing questions or problems to be solved so that students know exactly what they are looking for and can find the answers by themselves.

Other specific actions students undertake are related to methodology or, in other words, to specific procedures to be implemented. During the course, students are provided with language resources (reference and practice material) as well as with lots of samples of real language use, and they are encouraged to explore and find more texts. The purpose of these activities is to enable them to contrast what the grammar resources say with what they find in real texts. This is one of the actions that students do and that we consider especially important in terms of learner

autonomy, as it helps them pose their own language questions and, from there, carry out further learning actions.

Among the actions that students take, those related to the use of skills and strategies (e.g. skimming, predicting, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.) are prominent, as students mention them in their course work. Of particular interest is the fact that some students apply strategies proper to their discipline. Some of the students explicitly refer to a strategy that they have acquired as part of their discipline and announce that they will use it for language learning. In other cases, students reveal, through their work, the use of certain strategies that can be associated with their discipline—for example, an engineering student who gives grammatical explanations by using formulas.

As for the evaluation of progress and results, rather than mentioning language learning outcomes in terms of proficiency, students particularly refer to learning resources—with special emphasis on the use of technology. Students' perception of having acquired new resources is reflected in their use of key terms like "autonomy", "independence" and "self-sufficiency". Seeing themselves as autonomous learners, they also state their intention to undertake future learning actions, once the course is over, which can be regarded as a commitment towards the learning process. Nevertheless, students seem to find it difficult to define and articulate clearly the learning actions they intend to take in the future—similar to what happens when they determine learning objectives based on their needs analysis. Being able to narrow down future learning actions to take should help learners manage their learning.

Despite their difficulty in verbalising what specific actions and objectives they intend to pursue, students express a combination of intentions and positive attitudes (that is, disposition) towards English language learning. It is remarkable that, rather than language study, they view their future language learning activity as practice and communication; for example, this particular student even suggests that the learning process should be incorporated into their lives:

> *We must try to introduce the learning process into our daily live, in the way that it doesn't suppose any effort for our part, but doing it in an unconsciously way. For example, we can get used to read English journals, to visit English web pages, to view English films … To learn a language doesn't have to be a hard work* (DB).

The second parameter that we used in our study refers to our students' views and attitudes towards language and learning. Finding out about these views may help us draw a clearer picture of our students as language learners and understand the rationale underlying their decisions related to the learning process. The general attitude that students show towards English language learning, which is positive and indicates greater self-confidence, is clearly associated with the evaluation of their progress, as mentioned above. However, one of the categories that appear in the analysis of the data also reveals students' capacity to offer a critical view about some language teaching practices, in particular about the discrepancy between the explanations they receive as language learners of English and the real language they encounter when they are faced with authentic texts.

Given that the course takes place in distance mode and is based on the use of the Internet, students' views on these aspects are also especially prominent. When analysing distance learning, they emphasise the effort an online situation requires of students. According to our learners' views, online students should be self-motivated, organised, and able to manage their time and work, for example. Students also place emphasis on the contrast between what they call the

"traditional" and "online method". They point out such advantages of online learning as "freedom", easy access and availability while they mention the dehumanisation that online learning involves, on the grounds that there is "no human contact, only written words". They all agree that online English courses are not suitable for beginners, but for students who have reached a certain level of competence.

As a whole, students evaluate Internet resources positively. The areas they think the Internet may help them develop most are reading skills, real time "talking" through chats, and solving students' specific language doubts and difficulties. In this sense, it should be pointed out that students highly value that the use of Internet communication resources (like forums and chats devoted to language matters) allows them to talk about language while they are engaged in purposeful communication with users worldwide.

> *I think that Internet communication resources can be perfectly useful to solve language problems. I find it very interesting because it is a way of learning more things about a language while you are communicating with people all around the world* (CR).

These remarks reveal that students are able to use socio-affective strategies, such as reaching out for help from other people, which are characteristic of autonomous learning.

The views discussed so far provide us with a picture of our students as autonomous learners, a picture which becomes clearer as they describe—through an online discussion forum—the profile of the good language learner. According to our students, a good language learner should be interested in cultural aspects, as they are inextricably linked to language learning. Motivation, curiosity, interest, and self-discipline are considered to be important characteristics of the good language learner. As regards these concepts, students point out the recognition of one's needs as a learner, and the reasons for engaging in language learning, as well as "linguistic curiosity"—as they call it—which they define as "noticing the new words or expressions we hear, asking native speakers and trying to use them". This remark reveals an alert attitude towards the language, as students are ready to notice features of the input and incorporate them into their own production, turning to expert users of the language if necessary.

A key concept that emerges from the analysis of the data is learner awareness, as they recognise that "reading and discussing about the learning process", "being aware of the way you learn", and "learning new tips about how to learn and becoming a more active learner" can help them become more effective learners. The relationship between learner awareness and autonomous learning is made all the more apparent by our students' comments, related to students' active role as managers of their own learning, who decide on the strategies that can be more effectively applied:

> *Another feature of good language learners is that they are aware of the way they learn to learn: they try different strategies and discover which one makes the most for them, they take advantages of all the resources, etc.* (DB)

Actually, students set great store by the concept of learning styles and strategies. Specifically, they acknowledge the need for a learner to be "organized", which they define as being able to perform actions and take decisions related to learning management, such as analysing needs, setting objectives, working on a regular basis, being able to focus their work on their weaknesses. Besides, they also

mention specific techniques that can help them in learning management (e.g. using timetables). Also related to learning strategies, students mention the importance of using what they know about language.

> "*good language learners are those that can make use of what they already know about languages. That is, they will be able to apply their previous knowledge to the new situation*" (DB).

When describing the profile of the good language learner, students consider the concept of "learner autonomy" especially relevant, since it constantly appears in their discourse. Students use the concepts of "autonomy" and "independence" as synonyms, meaning "to learn by oneself". They particularly point out that autonomy derives from students' interest in learning and is a requirement for a good language learner. Students' own definition of learner autonomy involves making the most of every opportunity they have to learn the language:

> "*A good language learner has always to be a little autonomous, that is, he has to find everywhere the opportunity to learn something new or to practice what he had learned*" (DB).

In sum, the conclusion our students reach as regards learner autonomy is that autonomy itself is a key element in effective language learning, closely linked to motivation and interest, which goes beyond a particular course or learning situation (i.e. online or classroom-based). In their view, autonomy is an attitude that reveals a certain disposition towards learning on the part of students, who try to maximize their opportunities to use the language and to pay attention to new linguistic elements that they can incorporate into their own repertoire.


## 4. Discussion and conclusions

This article seeks to explore how students use the tools provided in a distance course intended to promote learner autonomy, which places special emphasis on Internet resources. From the analysis of their written answers to course activities, specially designed to allow them to express their views on language learning and to undertake actions related to learner autonomy, we tried to describe their profile as autonomous learners.

The analysis of these comments shows that students are able to perform a wide range of actions related to self-directed learning and to express their views on language and learning. In our opinion, both management and reflection are essential for learner autonomy. From the data analysed, one of the aspects that stands out is students' awareness of and concern for undertaking actions at the different stages of the learning process, which range from identifying needs to evaluating results, including the transfer of academic skills acquired in their field of study to language learning. At the same time, it is remarkable that students do not see the course as an end in itself; rather, they express their intention to go on with their learning process once the course has finished, by making the most of the opportunities they have to practice the language through exposure.

In addition to specific skills related to the management of learning, truly autonomous learners should also develop their own beliefs and views. Students have been able to express critical views towards certain teaching practices and opinions on the benefits of the Internet as a tool for language learning. Given the virtual context in which the course takes place, it is important to note that students are aware of the peculiarities of virtual learning environments and are able to compare them with traditional methods. They emphasize, however, that in order to

succeed in an online English course, the student needs to have already reached a certain level of competence.

An important aspect which emerges from the analysis of the learning frameworks developed by students is the profile that they draw of the good language learner. Specifically, students have pinpointed several aspects that have a key role in effective language learning. They acknowledge the importance of cultural knowledge as a gateway to the language, since, as one of the students points out, "a language is always the reflect[ion] of a culture". Students agree on the need to develop learner awareness in order to succeed in language learning. Particularly, they refer to the role of motivation and curiosity, which fuel the learning process, to the application of different learning strategies and awareness of one's learning style, and to the ability to manage the learning process. Of particular relevance to the present study is the fact that students themselves highlight the importance of learner autonomy; one of the students even defines the concept of autonomy, which derives from an interest in learning and consists in learning by oneself.

Even though most students are able to show behaviour and skills related to learner autonomy, there is a certain disparity among students, which leads us to assume that some learners will be more effective at managing their learning process than others. However, an aspect that comes to the fore is that a high level of commitment to learning clearly favours effectiveness in taking control of one's learning process. In this sense, course materials are intended to arouse students' commitment towards the learning process, by combining specific activities designed to promote autonomous behaviour with debates that encourage reflection on language and learning.

In this course, special emphasis has been placed on the learning-to-learn component and, therefore, it is hardly surprising that students have greatly internalised the discourse used in course materials. This fact may explain the large amount of metalanguage used by learners as well as its sophistication. Nevertheless, students not only use the terms that appear in their materials but also adapt them to make their own definitions and reach their own conclusions as regards what it means to learn a language. Apart from that, using a common electronic forum allows students to share and contrast their own views. Using the input from course materials, students can be seen to create their own discourse about language and learning, which can be useful information for the teacher, as it may serve as a common ground in order to identify and discuss the questions and aspects that arise throughout the term.

To conclude, finding out about students' profiles as learners may help the teacher take into account their views, needs, and expectations so as to adjust his or her intervention when helping them manage their own learning. The ultimate objective should be to help students develop a higher degree of learner autonomy and, thus, make the learning process more effective. A further research question that emerges from this study points to finding out whether, and to what extent, students maintain their level of commitment and are able to apply the skills they have acquired in this course in managing their own learning in the future, without the teacher's guidance.

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[i] This article reports on the rationale that underlies the course *English for Academic Purposes: Learning English through the Web* designed by Clàudia Barahona and Elisabet Arnó (Barahona and Arnó, 2001a).

[2] The Grammar Safari activity is based on the Grammar Safari that can be found at http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web.pages/GrammarSafari.html from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.