SELF REFLECTION DIARIES AS A MEANS FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTEXT

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FIELD DIARIES AS MEANS FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTEXT

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

From the experience as a teacher, one can evidence the important differences among students, not only from their personality but also from their own learning process. In that sense, try to keep students motivated towards learning, has become for teachers a high challenge and even more, guide them to take an active part of the class. Autonomy seems to be nowadays, one of the most relevant issues for teachers to work in their classes since learners show a high dependence form teacher methodologies. This project intends to illustrate how effective the implementation of students’ self reflection diaries in English classes could be in order to promote autonomous learning.

The procedure of this study was carried out in a foreign language institute inside a basic level course. The institute belongs to a public University in Pereira city and it provides students 16 levels of English which help them to reach the required level of English to graduate from any program from the University.

Self reflection diaries were written by 10 students after every class during 10 minutes approximately, guided by questions made by the teacher, about perceptions and feelings towards the class, auto evaluation of their performance in some activities and the evolution of their learning process.

After finishing the course, diaries were collected and students were interviewed in order to know their perceptions on the use of journals in the class. The information taken from the diaries evidences a development of self-awareness among students. They look like being more conscious of their abilities and weakness after being asked to report some experiences and reflexions about their learning process. At the same time, when students experience some grade of awareness of their learning process, this not only activates some sense of responsibility, but also, evidences some attitudes of autonomy.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since English has become one of the most speaking foreign language around the world, Colombia has also become more aware about the importance of educating people in this language. The general educational law states as one of its objectives “the acquisition of speaking and reading elements at least in one foreign language”. Following this idea, El Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo “intends to educate Colombian citizens able to communicate in the English language”. This previous aim is great evidence that society is more conscious about the notable spread of English, due to the continuous raising of political, economical and cultural issues and how in times of globalization to speak a foreign language is a huge necessity.

The bilingual education in Colombia then, has taken an important step in terms of promoting higher quality professionals. Students are being educated to face a globalized world and teachers are being prepared for developing an important role inside the classroom. As an English teacher of a foreign language Institute, I perceived students have shown to be interested, receptive and participative to the topics presented in class; they use to accomplish the assigned tasks and be very responsible with their work. Nevertheless, they seem to attend English classes only because it is a requirement. Learners do what is necessary to pass the course, but one can hardly see students looking for scenarios that help improve their English learning process outside the class. Most of the times, they show high dependence from the teachers’ methodology and materials, and do not develop much autonomous work.

Autonomy is crucial in students’ development because it provides the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Holec (cited by Benson, 2001). Additionally it is important to characterize that autonomous learner is the one who independently chooses the aims and purposes of a task, choose its goals and decide which material he should implement besides the way of evaluation he wants to adopt.
In the context of this study it is important to state that students’ groups could be very heterogeneous since students belonged to different programs, different ages and different interests. As a consequence of this fact, students did not have the same needs, the same points of view, the same beliefs or preferences. It is true that most of the students are responsible with their tasks, but is that the same of being responsible with their own process of learning?, or they are just following rules and strategies “imposed” by the teacher of what s/he thinks is the best for the students.

The relevance of developing students’ autonomy inside classrooms is reflected on the students’ need to reach consciousness of the process they carry out and consequently act and obtain positive outcomes. When learners become autonomous, Wenden (1998) they become an active part of their learning process, they do not only respond to the teacher’s stimulus but they are reflecting on what it really works in their process. The students do not have the passive’ role anymore, the learners are then the principal character inside the classroom and start to generate ideas to their own benefit thinking in their own necessities and the possible solutions. Scharle & Szabò (2005).

In order to help students to reach this autonomy, the implementation of self reflection diaries or journals seem to be practical tools as well for teacher as students. According to Candy (1991), learners are the ones who “build up the knowledge” since they reorganize and restructure their experience, following this idea, the teachers’ role would be to provide propitious environment for knowledge and motivate students to be aware of their process of learning. The learners, who play the most essential role, become not only the ones who are guided but the ones who think, reflect and take decisions about their own learning process. It is in that moment of being aware, where the learners become independent and more expectantly, autonomous.

Taking into account some of the ways to foster autonomy that Thanasoulas (2000) mentioned, such as self reports, diaries, evaluation sheets among other, this proposal intends to promote the use of self reflection diaries in the process of seeking for this autonomy. Supported on what Wenden (cited in Thanasoulas 2000: 8) says, the implementation of self reflection diaries help the students to become aware of their own
learning strategies by reporting what they are thinking during the performance of a task. In those diaries students can express their feelings and thoughts and through this introspection students can realize about the reason of their weaknesses in learning a foreign language and the possible ways to overcome them.

I would say that it is even more important the teachers’ efforts to understand students’ needs and differences, are students themselves who can become aware of the strategies that are the best for them. They are the ones who know how much time they need to understand a topic and develop a task, and which materials are really interesting and helpful for their learning process. Therefore, it is important to take in mind that autonomous learning more than a condition, is a process in which is significant the role of the student as the teacher’s. Jones (2007). Certainly, The learning process would be much better if teachers not only take into account students’ needs, but also guide the students to realize that those necessities are different from others and therefore they need different ways to face them and that they can do it by themselves.

This project, in view of the necessity of developing autonomous learning inside a group of English’ students, uses the self reflection diaries as a tool for collecting students’ perception about their learning process and finally, state if students writing could help in the improvement of autonomous learning
RESEARCH QUESTION

Main Question

• What is the impact of self reflection diaries to promote autonomous learning?

Sub-Questions

• What are students’ reflections toward the implementation of self reflection diaries?
• What are the students’ perceptions about the influence of their self reflection diaries in their own autonomous learning process?
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

General Objective

Characterize the effectiveness of the implementation of self reflection diaries in the development of autonomous learning, through the analysis of students’ reflections written in their journals, and their perception of the research activity.

Specific Objectives

1) Characterize students’ responses about the implementation of self reflection diaries.

2) Report students’ reflections written in their self reflections diaries.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Autonomy?

Most of the times, when we talk about autonomy, it comes to our mind as the ability to manage one’s affairs, or the independence for taking our own decisions. Referring to autonomy inside an academic context it is necessary to take into account some important definitions. The following paragraphs will present some characteristics about autonomy through the different points of view of some academics and, the explanation of self reflection diaries as a mean to foster autonomous learning.

Thanasoulas, (2000) states autonomy as an ideal but not inaccessible characteristic of students, where the students themselves are equipped with the knowledge and the adequate skills to monitor their own learning process. He remarks that there is not an absolute concept of autonomy and supports his view citing some important theorists’ definitions such as: Benson & Voller who affirm that the term autonomy is normally used in five ways, such as:

- For situations in which learners study entirely on their own.
- For a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self directed learning
- For an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education
- For the exercises of learners’ responsibility for their own learning
- For the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

In the same stream of ideas, Dickinson (1987) states that autonomy is “an attitude to language learning which may not necessarily have many external observable features”. Nevertheless she argues that there are some characteristics that can identify an autonomous learner, such as their ability to formulate their own learning objectives,
select and implement appropriate learning strategies and enrich them by identifying those which really are useful for them and which do not.

Through the author’s article: *What is Learner Autonomy and How can it be Fostered*, Thanasoulas (2000) brings to discussion many authors and theorists’ findings about autonomy in order to subtract the best of these theories and state some of the principal issues in developing autonomous learning. One of the main points of his work is to remark teachers’ role inside the students’ process of becoming autonomous. The importance of teachers’ accompany is clearly evident since they are the people in charge of “adapting recourses, materials and methods to the learners needs and abandon all this if need be” Thanasoulas (2000:12).

The author establishes teacher and students’ performance in promoting autonomous learning as a process that implies responsibility, motivation and some other conditions such as students’ strategies and styles. “Learner autonomy consist in becoming aware of, and identifying one’s strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to consider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning” Thanasoulas (2000:12).

Autonomy, according to the previous authors is then a process engaging not only students but also teachers’ compromise. Being an autonomous learner relies on many factors such as motivation, students strategies and styles, teachers and students awareness about the learning process, knowledge about learning’ methods and students and teachers’ attitudes towards students needs and differences.

As it was discussed in the previous paragraphs, autonomous learning is an attitude that has called the attention of many authors and theorist. On the other hand, in many cases it has been also the misunderstood topic among teachers, or the unreachable or the ideal state among learners. Inside a learning context the term
autonomy seems to be like a utopia. Teachers sometimes believed that in order to develop a good learner process it is just necessary to prepare well behaving students. Some attitudes such as paying attention to the teacher, respect partners' opinions, do the homework, erase the board and participate in class could permit students to reach some or in many cases all the aims proposed for a subject; nevertheless, these attitudes do not imply that students are successful students.

Wider Views of Autonomy and Some of Its Characteristics

Many authors have investigated about autonomy, about the most relevant characteristics and how to foster this ideal state. For example, Ortiz, (2006) through her work *Evaluating students’ autonomous learning through their uses of a self-access centre*, intended to evaluate a self access centre in terms of how students use it, that is what strategies are more implemented and what students' perceptions are towards this SAC.

Ortiz (2006) based her study on three main concepts which are: Evaluation, learning language strategies and autonomy. One of the first researcher’s assumptions is that an autonomous learner is that one who mainly uses the cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Cognitive strategies refer to how students think about their learning, metacognitive strategies describe how students manage their own learning process and the social strategies refer to learning by interaction with others. Based on these three characteristics Ortiz (2006) also cites Nunan (1997) in order to state that encouraging students to develop autonomous learning is a task best done inside the classroom. In one of her main findings Posada Ortiz (2006) confirms her first assumption that autonomous learners mainly use metacognitive and social strategies which are the strategies related to general management of learning. Through this work the researcher takes into account learners styles and strategies as one of the most important topics in promoting autonomous learning.
Mesa Villa and Frodden Armstrong (2004) as Ortiz (2006), have a social view of autonomy, they state that being an autonomous learner implies many characteristics such as the ability of students to formulate their own learning objectives, select and implement appropriate learning strategies and identify which of this strategies work for them, nevertheless they concern that this characteristics emerge not only from and individual process but also form a social work. The researchers then, cite the three versions of autonomy given by Benson (1997): the technical version, the psychological version and the political version. The first one depicts autonomy as it has been previously described by other authors, that is, as the act of learning a language outside the classroom without the intervention of the teacher, in this case, the learners work by themselves and the teachers are only guiders in giving strategies to be later applied by the students. The second version goes beyond the first one, arguing that autonomy refers more to the attitudes and abilities that help students to be more responsible for their learning process, but this version seems to be a more individual process. Finally, the political version, is more related with the environment where autonomy takes place, that is, it is not only the process of individual learning, but also the context that this process involves. After these three versions, Villa and Armstrong (2004) wanted to open the view of autonomy, not only based its characteristics in observable features and individual acts. They state that autonomy is a process that is only reached through the interaction and group cooperation.

The previous assumptions show a different view of autonomy. Authors keep the primary essence of autonomy of taking control, self-direction and responsibility, but they also take into account the social aspect of this term. Think about autonomy as a social development, shows the process of become autonomous from a different perspective of what to take charge of “our own” learning process means. The learning strategies cited by Ortiz (2006) give a notion about the principal features of an autonomous learner, where one of the principal is the social strategies. In the same way, Mesa Villa and Frodden Armstrong (2004) cite in their work the three versions that point out the individual and social side of autonomy. See autonomy as a social matter let us think in a more cooperative and not lineal process, where is not only important the learner himself
and his learning process, but give the freedom to have in mind the scenario, the environment, the teacher, the materials, the classmates etc.

With the previous statements, we see that most of the authors interested in the term of autonomy agree in the sense of perceiving this attitude as a positive matter which permits students to learn by their own means and, that is also a social process including the environment. But how can autonomy be developed? Little (1991) stresses that autonomy, “is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not another teaching method”, it means that it is part of the teaching process, it is not a different methodology. Benson (2003) argues that “autonomy can be fostered, but not taught” and Broady and Kenning (1996) express a similar idea when he states that “learner autonomy cannot be taught in the traditional sense, but can only be “promoted”. In that sense, we understand that students can develop autonomous learning, by themselves and/or with the teachers’ help.

Following the previous ideas, autonomy is then a process where students start being conscious about their own learning development. In this process students are aware of their weakness and strengths, they are capable to take decisions related with the strategies they feel more comfortable with the material they think is the most appropriate and the time they feel is necessary. In this process of becoming an autonomous learner, students are the main characters, but the teachers have also an important role. They are the guiders, the ones who help students to understand what kind of students they are and how they can improve their language abilities according to their learning styles.

Learning Strategies and Styles

According to Brown (2001), styles are related with students’ personality, such as extroversion, self-esteem and anxiety, or to cognition such as left/right-brain orientation, ambiguity, tolerance, field sensitivity. “Strategies, on the other hand are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a
particular end or planning designs for controlling or manipulating certain information”. This distinction let us understand the differences among students, their different way to study, their different way to accomplish a task and proceed inside a classroom. Brown affirms that “successful second language learners are usually people who know how to manipulate style (as well as strategy) levels in their day to day encounters”

According to Brown (2002), inside a classroom one can identify two learner styles: reflective and impulsive. With a reflective style, students tend to be quieter, and they think too much before speaking, they prefer writing exercises in which they can have more time to prepare it. On the other hand students with an impulsive style are more willing to speak in public, they do not think too much what they are going to say and for that reason they are more willing to take risks and at the same time to lose concentration easily. Both styles have advantages and disadvantages, nevertheless Brown states that they are just differences, the important part is that students can understand themselves, that is, understand their preferences and attitudes in their learning process. In his work “Strategies for Success” Brown guide teachers and students through the use of questionnaires and readings to become more aware about the styles and strategies students need to become successful language learners. According to the author, successful language learners usually understand their own learning styles and preferences, know which styles help them and use those styles and know which styles might hurt them and change or avoid those styles.

Rebeca Oxford (2001) suggests that “Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how - and how well – our students learn a second language”. According to the author learning styles are the general approaches, that is, the biological and developmental characteristics of learners. In contrast, she defines strategies as the specific steps, behaviors and techniques that learners use to accomplish a task. Similar to Brown, but more specific, Oxford (2001) explores some aspects of learning styles such as: sensory preferences, personality type, desire degree of generality and biological differences. In the same way, she also classifies learning strategies into six types: cognitive, metacognitive, memory related,
compensatory, affective and social. Oxford (2001) emphasize in the importance of learning strategies and the awareness about when and how to use them. The author claims that those students who have a greater ability to reflect in their learning process and employ learning strategies enjoy a high level of self – efficacy. Finally, Oxford (2001) affirms that learning strategies can facilitate students to become more independent and autonomous.

Scharle & Szabó (2000) agree that there are many factors affecting autonomy and one of the most important are the preferred learning styles. According with the authors factors involving style such as personality traits and cultural attitudes could affect notoriously the capacity to take personal initiative. They also state strategies as an important aspect of developing autonomy and responsibility; they argue that learners can only become responsible of their language competence if they are aware of the learning strategies they use.

Previous authors agree that learning styles and strategies become an important issue in the process of develop autonomy, and more important to reach this process is to help students realize what kind of student they are and what strategies they use in order to accomplish any task. There are many different kinds of learners, some of them are good with numbers and others feel more comfortable if they do not have to deal with them, some like working fast and some others like working slow, and that is important for students to become aware of these differences.

Autonomy and Responsibility

According to Scharle & Szabó (2000) a successful student is the one that takes an active position on his / her process of learning, being aware of which his/her strengths and weaknesses are. The authors consider that most of teachers have experienced the frustration of working with not well behaving students, or on the contrary with good behaving students who do not assume an active role. The authors agree that passive attitudes towards the learning process are caused because of the students over reliance on the teacher. Students will not mind to take an active role in
class as long as they feel the teacher is the responsible of everything that happens in the classroom.

In their work, the authors make a relation between being responsible and being autonomous pointing out some characteristics of both attitudes and concluding that they are close interrelated. For example, they state responsible learners as the students who are conscious of the importance of their own efforts in the learning process, doing their homework not only to please the teacher but because they want to learn. By the same way, an autonomous learner does not only take advantage of the class and teacher activities but also become more independent from the teacher not waiting to be told what to do. They emphasize in the importance of promoting autonomous learning and responsibility considering that no matter how much a student could learn inside the classroom, they will need to practice outside and by their own. Scharle & Szabó (2000:4) state that in order to promote autonomy and responsibility, “students, first need to realize and accept that success in learning depends as much on the students as on the teacher”. Moreover, they claim that students should be encouraged focusing on their learning process rather than the outcome, and in that way they will be more conscious of their contribution to this process and consequently start being more responsible and autonomous students.

Kate Chanock (2003) explains in her conference about autonomy and responsibility how these two conditions are interconnected and how sometimes they are misunderstood in many cases. For her, a student can be responsible even if he decides to become dependent from anyone else. The author argues that, however it is important to promote autonomous learning; it is also important to recognize that there are many things that students cannot readily discover for themselves, and that they are being responsible if they do not hesitate to ask someone who knows. Learners then, could prefer to be guided or look for correction in order to learn through this correction, which would not mean that students are not being autonomous. Chanock (2003:4) depicts this assumption by citing Candy (1988:97): “The novice’s need for assistance’ does not necessarily represent some pathological inadequacy on the part of the learner. On the
contrary, it may even be evidence of a higher-order form of autonomy which allows him or her ‘to choose between dependence and independence as he [or she] perceives the need’.

Another important aspect pointed out by the author is the social implication of responsibility and autonomy. She claims that even some cultures seem to promote individualism, and despite sometimes autonomy is perceived as an individual work, the fact of being responsible means accepting what the world requires of us. Likewise, autonomy should be seen as a process of self-awareness and learning responsibility of our own learning process that also includes the environment where it takes place.

According to the previous authors, one can deduct that responsibility and autonomy are two concepts that cannot be seen as divided learning conditions, they are close interrelated in the sense that both are conceived as important steps to become a successful learner. It is interesting that both authors agree in the sense that becoming responsible and autonomous is not just an individual work. Scharle & Szabó highlight the role of the teacher in this process as the guiders for students to raise awareness in their learning process. In the same way, Chanock states the social implication that the notion of responsibility has and how the concept of autonomy encloses more that the student himself taking into account teachers important role inside this process.

Autonomy and Motivation

As we have seen there are many factors that could affect the process of autonomy such as learner styles and strategies, awareness of weaknesses and strengths, personality, cultural issues etc. Another important aspect affecting autonomy is motivation, and this has been highly investigated by many authors since many findings demonstrate that positive attitudes and motivation are essential in order to become a successful learner. Lightbown & Spada (1999:56) cites Gerdner and Lambert (1972) to describe two types of motivation: “Integrative motivation to refer to language
learning for personal growth and cultural achievement, and *instrumental motivation* for language learning for more immediate or practical goals”.

Both types of motivations can affect positively language learning; nevertheless, Lightbown and Spada (1999: 56) argue that “if the speaker’s only reason for learning a second language in external pressure, internal motivation may be minimal and general attitudes towards learning may be negative”. Finally the authors characterize motivated students as those who most of the times participate actively in class, express interest in the subject matter and study a great deal. Besides, they stress the role of the teacher to promote motivation inside the classroom through relevant activities, interesting materials and group work.

Scharle & Szabó (2000) agree with Lightbown & Spada (1999) in stating that intrinsic motivation should be promoted since it is the source that in some way makes students to feel interested in learning a new language. On the other hand, Tarone & Yule (1989) cited by Thanasoulas (2000: 7) state that “self-steam and desire to learn are deemed to be the most crucial factors in the learners’ ability to overcome occasional setbacks or little mistakes in the process of learning a second language”.

Jones (2007) also agree in suggesting that students motivation are encouraged by interesting topics; nevertheless, it is important to have in mind that all the topics are not equally interesting for all the students. The author points out some aspects that could raise students’ motivation towards the subject such as: personalization, developing confidence, overcoming resistance and making progress. The first aspect, points out the opportunity that learners have to talk about personal feelings and experiences through the target language, what would seem very enjoyable for learners. Developing confidence refers to how the teacher helps learners to take a more active role inside the class through group activities, short role plays and open ended questions for discussion. Jones (2007) states that inside a classroom, there are always students less motivated than others, and probably they could be reluctant to speak in English. For the author, the best way to overcome resistance is by stimulating group work.
remaining students the importance and advantages of working together (students – students, students – teacher). Finally another way to increase motivation is encouraging learners to take risks, which means giving them challenging tasks which make them progress in their learning process.

Reflective diaries in an English Classroom

Several studies have shown that if learners write regularly, in authentic ways, their writing fluency will be strengthened and retrospective analysis will help them raise awareness of their own learning (Brown, 1994). Writing journals and diaries are one means of organising this kind of regular practice, and they help learners self-monitor, self-assess and reflect on their learning processes (Nunan, Lai & Keobke, 1999).

In the process of becoming autonomous learner, field diaries have been used not only as a tool for gathering information about the learning process, but also as an strategy to reach self consciousness of the same process. In that sense, diaries are one of means of organizing the awareness of students’ own learning. According to Holec (1991) field diaries relate to learner autonomy in terms of the ability to take charge of one’s own learning (p.3). Holec, in his research AUTONOMY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER (1991) found that autonomous learners organize their resources autonomously to reach a goal that has been set. This is the kind of autonomy which “does not create its own directions, but, once a direction has been initiated”, [for example, by the teacher or the curriculum - YT], enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.

The first step towards this ability to organize one’s activities autonomously is to become aware of one’s own learning processes. Field diaries can help students to do this. Rather than emphasizing the importance of simply writing diaries regularly, we would help our students better by guiding them in such a way as to provoke deeper
reflection, and providing opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arise from their experiences. No matter whether their feelings are positive or negative, conscious reflection is a good start to autonomous learning.

Incorporating field diaries in the EFL class empowers learners by providing a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experience and practices of others in the institutions of which they are part and in the society they live in. The idea of giving students a tool to write about their learning process is very appealing because knowledge can be stimulated and grounded in their own being, experiences, needs, circumstances, and destinies. Through self-reflection diaries students record their personal responses and reflection, is a place where our thinking can become visible, we toss around ideas and consider what others think; we make connections between new and prior information, examine our own thinking strategies and judge our own learning.

Fulwiler’s opinion (1991) about reflective diaries is that students can use them for diverse purposes such as class starters and as a vehicle for posing and solving problems, to summarize important aspects of a lesson, to monitor students’ progress in the class, and to give students the opportunity to write to each other about concerns and questions raised in the class. Field diaries are also places where students can try out their expressive voices freely without fear of evaluation. Genesse and Upshur (1999) present a number of benefits of diaries: first, they provide useful information for individualizing instruction. In other words they help students in their writing skills, writing strategies making use of students’ experiences outside school; learning processes and students’ feelings about themselves, their teachers, interests, expectations and goals.

Second, field diaries increase opportunities for functional communication between students and teachers. Third, they give students opportunities to use language for genuine communication and personalized reading. Fourth, they permit teachers to individualized language teaching by modeling writing in their responses to students’
diaries. Fifth, they promote the development of certain writing skills and, sixth, they enhance students’ involvement in, and ownership of learning.

Genesse and Upshur (1999) also recognize the uniqueness of field diaries as a means for collecting data, as they are a method of qualitative information that is extensively under the control of the students since they can write whatever they want. This statement is supported in our Colombian context by Viafara (2005) because he conducted a study in which he designed tasks within a reflective framework to support pre-service teachers in their practicum. As a tool, he used field diaries to provide participants an opportunity to engage them in one of the most successful manners of reflection: dialoguing with oneself or someone else. Thus, the researcher and the participants share through the field diaries suggestions, answers, experiences, agreements and disagreements.

According to Young (1999) using reflective diaries during the class, help not only to the student but also to the teacher in building the knowledge of the course. The author emphasizes in the importance of writing to learn, that is, making students conscious of the process they carried out while they are writing, or during the time they spent in the classroom. Young also advises that reflective diaries could be written in students’ first language, “for beginners, journals in their native language might be a place where they can express their feelings without having to worry about remembering difficult grammar or vocabulary” (Young 1999, 18).
Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Type of Study

I conducted a descriptive - interpretative qualitative case study taking into account the considerations given by Seliger & Shohamy (2003) who affirm that a qualitative study is a process which is based on people’s believes or opinion rather than statistical data. Besides of that, it uses qualitative methods to gather data like self reflection diaries and an interview. (Taylor and Bogdan, cited in Deslauriers, 2004) defines “Qualitative research as it produces and analyzes descriptive data like written or said words and observable behaviors.” Thus, this study did not only use these tools but also was focused on students’ attitudes and experiences; since those issues cannot be measured, this project was carried out through qualitative type of study.

It is a descriptive project since it is based on human attitudes and reactions. It attempts also to understand a phenomenon through the implementation of some instruments and the emerged responses. According to what Key (1997) says, “Descriptive method is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena to describe "what exists” with respect to variables or conditions in a situation.” In that sense this research project reports the data obtained before and after the application of diaries and self - reports of 10 students from an English language Institute.

Finally, this study was also based in the Interpretative method, since Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) say that it is a way for people to built meanings, subjective perspectives of a situation through their interaction with the world. Taking into account the previous idea I did not only described a situation but also made an interpretation of the results after having implemented self reflection diaries with students.
CONTEXT OF STUDY

Setting

One of the universities of Pereira decided to create a foreign Language Institute as part of its academic structure in view of the necessity to improve the quality of the new professionals. The Department of Humanities and Languages led the restoration of this institute conscious of the great importance of English language generated due to the present cultural and economic development in our country in addition to the continuous technologic innovations.

This foreign language Institute aims to educate all the students from the University and people outside it in learning a foreign language and more especially English. It provides sixteen courses of English which are part of five levels (elementary, pre–intermediate, intermediate, upper–intermediate and advanced). Those levels are based on the Common European Framework of Reference,(guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries. Its main aim is to provide a method of assessing and teaching which applies to all languages in Europe) which gives reliability to the institution since it follows the common standards to learning a language.

Participants

This project was carried out with 10 students of basic level during the process of their first course, they were chosen at random, their ages between 17 and 21 approximately and they were students from any program of the previous named University.

My role as a researcher was an active role, since I was the teacher and the researcher at the same time. Following Alder and Alder ( 1994, p. 380 cited in Sharan, 1998, p. 101) description of participant as observer I had an “active membership role”, I was involved in their process, providing information, designing activities, collecting data
and observing students performance. “Researchers are involved in the central setting’s activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members’ values and goals” (ibid). Thus, I was involved actively in the process of students’ writing by guiding them through questions an analyzing the evolution of their learning process.
INSTRUMENTS

The core of this project was to characterize the information collected after having implemented self reflection diaries with students from a foreign language institute. It is relevant to clarify that although these diaries were tools for collecting data, they are going to be the main topic of the project because it analyzes the impact of self reflection diaries in the process of becoming autonomous.

Diaries

Diaries and self-reports were used based on Bell’s (2001) description, which defines diaries as a way to gather information about professional activities. In that way students used them in order to record their performance through activities proposed in class, thinking about what they do and how they do it, and what strategies or instruments they used to accomplish a task. Despite Bell’s perception of diaries as that they are not records of personal experiences, or personal journals about thoughts and feelings, I permitted students to write about personal insights about the English classes. Wallace (1998) describe diaries as “they are private documents without essential rules to be kept in which writers can confide whatever thoughts or feeling occur to them” though the definition of “private” students were able to record their feelings, expectations, improvements or frustrations experimented during the English classes without losing the academic perception, and then returned to the teacher in order to analyze the information in there.

Interviews

I decided to use a semi structure interview for this project based on Seidman, I. (1991) definition. He describes interviews as a method of data collection that provides a deep understanding of the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. In the context on this study, the principal objective of this instrument was to obtain more genuine information of the use of self reflective diaries in English classes. According to Merriam, S. (1998) interviewing is the art and science of exploring
the subjective knowledge, opinions and beliefs of an individual. Based on this assumption, I used more flexible questions which can provide information about behavior or students' feelings in a deeper way.
DATA ANALYSIS

The previous techniques were applied in the following way:

First, each of the 10 students had their own self reflection diary. Those diaries were used by students at least three times per week and they wrote on it when they feel it is relevant to report any event of their process or when the teacher asks them to do it.

Finally, the students were exposed to an interview; this interview was used after having collected the data through the field diaries. There were some general questions for all the students, and some more specific ones depending on the information collected. All the previous data collection techniques were developed in Spanish since I worked with elementary students and it is more comfortable for them to write in their L1.

Students’ names were chosen by random; they do not belong to the real participants in order to keep the privacy of them.

After self reflection diaries were collected at the end of the course, I started by making codification of students answers. As I numbered the questions, answers were transcribed in the same order: Q1S1, Q1S2…Q2S1 where Q = question following by the number of the question and S = student following by the number of the student. After that, I read the answers again and wrote comments on what students express as feelings, attitudes of awareness, motivation, perceptions of the class and their performance, among others. I classify the students’ answers in 4 categories according to comments I wrote. These 4 categories were: students’ self awareness, students’ motivation, strategies and styles, and samples of students’ autonomy.

Finally, students were interviewed after finishing the course in order to know their opinion about the implementation of the self reflection diaries in the class. The interviews were transcribed, organized and categorized in the same way that the information taken from the students’ diaries.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Raising Students’ Awareness through Self-reflection Diaries to construct Autonomy

The findings presented in this section are based on the qualitative reports depicted in the students` reflective diaries and the interviews conducted with six of ten students. These reports demonstrate the process that learners carried out in the way of becoming autonomous, and show how these diaries became a helpful tool for class reflection, not only for students but also for the teacher.

The most relevant findings in my study were my realization that requesting students to use field diaries in the classroom resulted in a raise of their consciousness about their learning process. I realized that the instructions that I gave the students to write entries in their field diary may have elicited their descriptions of how they felt in a class, and their self-evaluations of how they performed in a specific activity. Through the process of writing a field diary, learners reflected about their weaknesses and strengths in their English learning process and the emotions involved in their journey through learning English. As a result of this finding I could identify some steps that follow the process to becoming autonomous through the use of field diaries: (1) Recognition of weaknesses in the learning process. (2) Illustrations of students’ learning strategies and styles (3) Students’ feelings in the English learning process (4) Consciousness of responsibility (5) Autonomous Learning.

Findings are mention in the same order I found details were happening while students write their self reflection diaries according to the guiding questions.
Students’ learning process: their weaknesses’ identification through self reflection diaries.

The first issue revealed through students self reflection diaries was their realization about their weaknesses and strengths during the learning process. Through field diaries, students were guided by the teacher to be more conscious about their positive and negative aspects of their learning process. Through specific questions which encouraged students to reflect and think about the class, about their performance in the English learning process, their attitudes, their feelings and thoughts, students wrote about their most significant abilities and limitations and how they could affect their learning process. In the data collected in these diaries, answers revealed the students acquisition of awareness of their learning process. The following excerpt was taken from Alex’s field diary and depicts the way most of students think and express their ideas through their field diaries:

*En mí, la dificultad que más se presenta: en momentos no logro comprender el mensaje que la profesora da para realizar sus explicaciones. Esto se presenta ya que enredo una palabra con otra en el momento de la pronunciación o en otro uso porque desconozco su significado.*

*…Personalmente se me dificulta un poco la organización de las palabras dentro de las oraciones, refiriéndome a pasado – presente, aunque poco a poco empiezo a dominarlo, el hecho de no aprenderme los verbos, se convierte en un obstáculo.*

I can notice in this passage that Alex is not only aware of his limitation in understanding the teacher’s explanations, but he also states the possible causes for this limitation. He then, sets his lack of vocabulary and pronunciation as a barrier for communication in the target language. In the second paragraph, Alex is now more specific in reporting his difficulty; he goes through his grammar knowledge and specifies the problem.

The idea of using a journal or a self reflection diary with English students became from the positive concepts that many authors describe about this method, and under the necessity to create more independent students. Through this project, self reflection diaries give me an idea about the process students experiment by writing about their
experiences in classroom and how they became more conscious and even more critical about their learning process. Wilcox (1998) agrees that when students record their personal responses and reflections on their journals, they make connections between new and prior information, examining their own thinking strategies and can also judge their own learning.

Another important aspect is how students become conscious of their weaknesses and take into account the positive aspects in their learning process as well. Even more important, they try to be conscious about the possible reasons for their problems, some of them know that their lack of interest is a reason for their difficulties; others are more specific in describing their problem and causes, trying to look for more detailed characteristics such as spelling problems, shyness, etc. In the following example, Maria describes in her field diary the aspects in which she thinks she is good, and more specifically, she describes her weakness and what she considers the cause is.

*Maria:* Entre mis mayores debilidades está la escucha, cuando nos hacen exámenes de listening, trato de buscar coherencia en las hojas que nos da la profesora, me parece que la pronunciación de muchas palabras es muy similar, y que las personas hablan demasiado rápido.

(….) insisto que mi mayor debilidad es el escuchar, casi siempre no entiendo nada porque el sonido de las palabras se me parece mucho y creo que aquí es donde radica el problema y gracias a ese sonido parecido de las palabras es que puedo deducir lo que escucho.

Maria is conscious that her weakest skill is listening, but the most relevant description in there, is how Maria also tries to find the way to understand what she listens to. She states her difficulties to understand oral texts due to the fact that some words are very similar in their pronunciation. Nevertheless, she also finds in this obstacle a base to deduct, look for coherence and come up with the meaning of those words she does not understand.

By establishing a dialogue with the students by checking the comments on their field diaries, I noticed that students could easily express their feelings about learning English. In that sense, students discovered that they had more competences to learn a specific task, and also discovered their difficulties to develop other ones, for example when they express their difficulty to understand listening exercises. I found this part of
field diaries to be the most helpful one since the students’ comments were extremely honest at the moment of describing what they liked or did not like. Fulwiler (1991) agreed that EFL students can write about academic problems, and progress to sorting out where they are, how they are doing and perhaps what to do next. I was especially interested in knowing whether students were affected positively or negatively by the process of raising awareness through the field diaries. Most of the students felt happy, comfortable and motivated by knowing about their actual weaknesses of learning a foreign language.

When students were asked to reflect about their English learning process, they came up with many ideas about the possible causes for their learning difficulties. It is worthy to state that this students’ reflection about their learning process is a significant step for searching possible solutions and consequently a path for reaching autonomy. As the previous examples have depicted, some students could describe through field diaries the aspects in which they do not feel strong enough and the possible reasons for their weaknesses in the English language. The following excerpts were taken from students’ field diaries in which they were asked to think and describe their learning process.

Camila: Cómo ha sido mi proceso? no tan bueno porque debería estudiar más para mejorar el vocabulario, estudiar cada clase para entender mejor, en los verbos debo hacer énfasis debido al uso de su pronunciación.

Hector: (…) se me dificulta la pronunciación de las palabras o frases debido a que siempre las estoy pronunciando como se escriben. La retención del vocabulario, por lo que el tiempo dedicado al inglés no es suficiente.

In the previous samples I can notice how learners seem to be really aware about their weaknesses, such as lack of vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation etc. We could see how students were conscious about their difficulties in English and were able to reflect on them and be more specific in describing those difficulties. It is also significant the way they explain the possible causes for their weaknesses. For example Evelyn and Santiago state shyness as the principal problem for speaking and advancing in their
English learning process, Hector says that he is not very good at memorizing vocabulary and Camila is conscious that her process has been slow since she has not been compromised in studying harder.

Students felt the field diaries were a means of communication where their opinions, feelings, realizations, and points of view were shared and valued as interesting and important with the facilitator. Peyton and Reed (1990) present field diaries as a wonderful opportunity to have an actual dialogue with the learners in an English classroom. The field diaries, they assert, becomes on one hand an alternative to classrooms interactions in which the facilitator asks questions for students to answer; on the other hand, an alternative for the teacher to respond with comments to students’ written texts and finally as a tool for the teacher to know students thoughts toward the English class. In contrast, field diaries is an exchange of ideas among students – teacher.

Finally, the following excerpt from a student’s interview illustrates what the majority of students think about the implementation of field diaries in the class:

Alex: es importante (uso de los diarios) ya que allí expresamos las dificultades, las ventajas que tenemos, además es un medio en el cual tenemos una medida que nos va diciendo que tenemos que ir haciendo, qué está pasando, que tenemos que aprender, en que andamos mal ya que nosotros mismos lo escribimos, lo planteamos entonces conocemos más las debilidades.

In this sample, Alex answered to the question of what he thinks about writing a field diary. I can notice that he emphasizes in the idea that his diary becomes a tool for reflecting about his weaknesses and strengths. In other words, he also depicts the diary as a guide, where he can find not only the aspects to improve, but also the events that he thinks are important in his learning process.

Scharle & Szabó (2000) argue that successful students are those that are self conscious of their learning process, being aware of which their strengths and weaknesses are. In other words the field diaries become a valuable space for the students’ voices. It means, that I dedicated time to read and analyze what students
have to say about the class and their learning. Students’ field diaries were written and thought by the students themselves; this made the classroom a laboratory in the lives of the students where they recognized whether their learning styles and strategies were working or not.

Illustrations of students’ learning strategies and styles through reflective writing

Another important aspect revealed from dairies and interviews’ data was how learners unconsciously wrote about their learning strategies and styles. They probably did not know at the beginning what being a reflective (students who like to think before making a decision) or impulsive (students who make quick decisions and are willing to gamble that they are right) student implies; perhaps they were not really aware of the strategies they used for developing any task, but when they were asked to write about their learning process, and more specifically about the moments or events they thought were relevant in this process, they came up with many important characteristics that can easily describe the way they are as students.

As a consequence of the writing process students were engaged, they were able to report a certain degree of self-awareness about the strategies they used to complete a language task, (like for example writing a word several times to learn it by heart, or listening to music and translate the lyrics in order to learn vocabulary), and briefly describe the characteristics of their own learning style (whether they prefer to work in groups, or individually, if they like participate in class or like better stay in silence). When students are self-aware of their own process, they identify their own learning style and the best strategies to use in a class. Oxford (2001) suggests that “Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how - and how well – our students learn a second language”. This means, that I could identify that students expressed implicitly different uses of strategies and describe their learning style in the classroom during any task. This finding revealed that all the students had
their own style to learn a foreign language and they expressed their opinions that different language learning strategies helped them understand English.

The following excerpt was taken from some students’ field diaries and depicts more accurately the previous finding:

Santiago: me he sentido mejor en las clases dinámicas o con actividades y talleres con ilustraciones.

Erika: me encantan las clases cuando las hacen tan dinámicas, realmente es muy importante el material para trabajar con ello hace que entendamos mejor y logremos concentrarnos más, me siento muy cómoda con los trabajos en grupo o cuando tenemos que salir al tablero.

Evelyn: Los juegos son una muy buena mecánica de aprendizaje y realmente ayudan a desestresarse y animarse en aprender cosas nuevas, además ayuda a fomentar las relaciones interpersonales.

Hector: me gusta cuando el trabajo es individual, ya que me tomo el tiempo que necesito y trabajo a mi ritmo, estar en grupo me parece bien, pero cuando hay que exponer, prefiero que lo hagan mis compañeros.

In the previous examples, the first three learners described situations inside the class in which they felt better; they agreed to prefer dynamic classes, games and fun activities. These characteristics they express are clear evidence of learners’ styles, for example, Erika feels comfortable by working in groups and she seems to be willing to take risks since she likes going to the board, clear evidence of an “impulsive” style. In the same way, Evelyn thinks that games are good ways for her to feel comfortable and motivated with the target language as well as creating social relations. In the specific case of Hector, he is seems to belong to those more reflective students since he expresses through his filed diary to prefer working alone and not to take the risk of make mistakes.

The role of self reflection diaries in the recognition of what kind of student or what strategies I use as a learner is confirm by Brown (2002) in his book strategies for success where he persuades EFL students to write journals by telling them that they are very informal diaries about their own feelings and thoughts as they are studying English. He also gives some steps such as “write answers to the questions in the journal exercises at the end of each chapter”, “write other lists and ideas, if you want to, for the
other exercises”, among others. With this instructions the author agrees that students who think in their own learning, will be able to see which strategies work best for them and which do not, that will help students to find their identity as students and their preferences.

Reflective diaries seems to be a good strategy to make learners themselves identify the “way” they like to study and the methods they prefer to use in the process of learning. Maybe students already know their preferences intrinsically, but once they write about them, they become more conscious about their own learning process and could identify the better way to get solutions to their learning difficulties.

Reflective diaries as mean of expression of students feelings

When I asked students to write a field diary I remember told them to think in their childhood or adolescence age, when some of them had a diary which they carefully kept, in which they wrote all the feelings and important events of their lives. Writing about important events makes us reflect a little bit on what is happening. The first purpose of writing a field diary in the English classes was to make students think, reflect and be aware of their learning process. Students not only described how they thought their learning process was going, but also they described how they felt about learning a foreign language:

**Evelyn:** he descubierto que una debilidad que no me permite avanzar es la timidez, pues a veces trato de no participar y no preguntar mucho y eso no es bueno, pues me quedo con las dudas y no aprendo.

**Santiago:** (...) además me da pena y por eso me equivoco en los quizes de hablar o exponer en inglés.

**Santiago:** Mi proceso en el inglés ha sido lento, ya que es una materia que no me gusta mucho.

En la clase de hoy me sentí con pereza, porque casi no me gusta leer y también hoy entre con sueño a clase. Lo que más se me dificultó fue la comprensión de los otros capítulos que trabajaron mis compañeros.
**George:** Pero como ya lo dije creo que he aprendido bastante y además tengo las ganas y creo que eso es algo muy importante para lograr un buen aprendizaje y lo bueno es que el inglés no solo se ve en la clase de inglés, si no que se ve en todas partes (...)

Students’ feelings can play an important role in the students’ learning process since they could affect it in a positive or negative way. As we can see in the previous excerpts, Santiago knows that his English learning process has been slow since he does not like the subject. The same student also describes how he felt lazy and asleep in one of the classes, and consequently how it was difficult for him to understand the reading. On the other hand George states how much he has learned and how important is to be motivated for his learning process.

Through self reflection diaries students can highlight their enjoyment, laziness, enthusiasm, and emotions involved in a specific task. According to the students’ observations, they were not only conscious of the consequences of their attitudes, but also they experienced the need to do some reflections and look for different solutions in relation to the situation they faced in the class.

After recognizing and improving students’ behavior, they were more involved and participated so much in the activities proposed by the facilitator. It was related to Lightbown & Spada (1999) who argue that students can adopt negative attitudes if the the internal motivation is minimal and their only reason for learning a second language is an external pressure. Brown (2001) also claims that motivation is related to the characteristics of feelings, emotions and goals of the students. The previous theories agree that students learn more successfully when they are intrinsically motivated. It implies activities for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself.

Through self reflection diaries students also mentioned that when they were not intrinsically motivated, they were not engaged in the activities for their own sake. It means that the motivations did not come from inside the students. In other words students’ behavior did not bring them pleasure if they thought that the class was not interesting and the interaction with the class was minimal. It allowed that the students did not contextualize the English language in their lives, or with other themes like music, arts etc.
Consciousness of responsibility in reflective students

In the previous samples from students’ reflective diary I could evidence some students’ thoughts about their learning process. In these field diaries they more specifically described their weaknesses in the English language and the possible causes. When learners were asked about the advantages of writing a reflective diary, data from interviews showed that after students seemed to be more aware of their learning weaknesses, they demonstrated some range of motivation and responsibility towards their learning process as it is depicted in the following excerpts:

**Evelyn:** Las ventajas (de escribir un diario), primero reflexionar sobre en qué va bien uno y en qué va mal, en segundo también como a partir de esa reflexión uno mismo saber cómo planearse algo para mejorar, que es buenísimo. (…) luego al escribir en el diario recordé y yo dije, pero por qué? entonces eso ahí mismo me ayuda, tengo que repasarla, tengo que entenderla.

**Alex:** (…) son mis debilidades, se supone que las debo superar y con esto yo ya planteo que es lo que necesito.

Both students agree that field diaries became a tool for them not only to think a little more about their difficulties, but also it became a base to state possible solutions. Evelyn describes briefly a special situation in which she establishes an objective (study and understand “X” topic) after having writing in her diary, what it clearly demonstrates a responsible act in her learning process. Likewise, Alex seems to be aware about his weaknesses and how by writing in his diary he could state what he needs to do to get over them.

Students involved in the process of writing a field diary reported that besides learning inside the classroom they understood the necessity of studying by their own. Students also expressed that no matter how much they learn through lessons exercises or activities, they will need to learn by practice autonomously. Moreover, they understood that they first need to accept that success in learning depends as much on their attitude as on the teacher.
According with Scharle & Szabó (2000) responsible learners are those who accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, writing and behaving accordingly. It means that students through writing in their field diaries, they recognize that their role is as important as the teacher’s role in the process of becoming autonomous. In other words, they are not aspiring to get a good mark, or to please the teacher, but they are simply making an effort in order to learn something or improve their abilities in the subject. This assumption is argued by Scharle & Szabó (2000) when they said that responsible students cooperate with the teachers and their classmates for everyone’s benefit. Furthermore, students are conscious of their own progress and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit including classroom activities and homework.

After students acquired a sense of responsibility, they showed a degree of motivation to get over the difficulties in their learning process. The finding also showed that positive attitude, group work and games are related to success in second language learning. As Candy (1991) claimed, language learning is not just a matter of intelligence or a cognitive act where students meet and interiorize grammar rules. The following excerpts from students’ interviews demonstrate how students became more motivated after writing in their field diaries:

Alex: al identificar las debilidades y al saber que tengo aspectos positivos, esto me da más motivos para yo seguir exigiéndome y adquiriendo más conocimiento.

Maria: (...) pero al poner este tipo de cosas uno se da cuenta que es importante, por qué es importante para la vida, porque más adelante me va a servir, esto me hace crecer más como persona, además profesionalmente porque el inglés abre muchas puertas.

Evelyn: A mí me gusta la idea, realmente al uno escribir y acordarse de todo eso que uno aprende y que va uno mal, lo ayuda a uno a motivarse a aprender más, es buenísimo (...) en cambio ahora que lo veo en la clase, que encima lo recuerdo escribiendo en el diario y quiero pasar eso, quiero aprender más, eso es buenísimo.

As I mentioned before field diaries seemed to be not only a tool to raise students’ awareness but also students’ motivation. The samples above, which were answers from the interviews, reveal how learners could feel more motivated to learn the language
after they wrote in their field diaries and became aware of their learning process. Maria for example states how through this writing exercise she realized about the importance of learning English. On the other hand, Evelyn describes how she became motivated when she used her diary to remember previous classes and important events. Finally, Alex felt motivated when he realized that he also has positive aspects in his learning process.

The previous finding also reported that when students were motivated, they participated actively in class, expressed interest in the subject and were more capable to find solutions by their own. Students also found the content interesting, relevant and challenging since they were more conscious of their personal needs, likes, weaknesses and strengths. As Wenden (1998) pointed out, students show enthusiasm when they are engaged in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward. In that sense, students reflected and acted by means of an intrinsic motivation that helped them to develop strategies to arise a better self-esteem, peer evaluation and cooperative learning or group work.

Some samples of autonomy in the process of writing a reflective diary.

Through the analysis of data from field diaries and interviews, I could notice that once learners have achieved certain degree of learning awareness, they demonstrate some autonomy attitudes. I considered mention this finding at last since there was a process of becoming aware, expressing feelings and obtain certain degree of responsibility (as the previous findings said) before students demonstrate samples of autonomy. Despite the time for students to write on their field diaries was quite short (only one English’ course of 40 hours), at the end of the course learners described how they became a little more independent from the teacher and were more proactive out of the class. The following samples were taken from students’ field diaries to illustrate the previous statement:
George: se cuales son mis debilidades en el inglés y mi deseo es aprender entonces lo que hago y he hecho para solucionar ese problema es escuchar más música y tratar de entender a lo que se refiere. Otra cosa que he hecho es poner películas subtituladas y concentrarme en como hablan y como pronuncian las palabras todo esto a fin de fortalecer el oído para el inglés.

Camila: saco el tiempo para leer o ver programas o noticias que no tengan traducción o subtítulos para intentar comprender lo que se dice y utilizo el diccionario e intento copiar como se lee la palabra en inglés con mis propias palabras para pronunciar o tratar de pronunciar correctamente

Maria: (...) cada vez que veo palabras parecidas escribo 10 veces una con su significado e igualmente la otra.

The previous attitudes demonstrate how learners after being aware of their weaknesses, they start thinking and implementing their own strategies to get over these difficulties. As George describes, he is conscious of his weaknesses but in addition he is motivated to learn; as a result, he looks for solutions such as listening to music and watching films, paying attention especially to the pronunciation of the words. Camila also uses films to improve her listening skill, trying to understand the message, using the dictionary and writing the words as she listens to. In the same way, when Maria finds words with similar pronunciation, she uses writing as a way to train her memory and learn the words that confuses her.

The entire process in writing a field diary described in the previous findings remarks that self-report is a mean of raising awareness of learners’ strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals and outcomes. Conceiving autonomous learning as the ability to manage their own learning process, a good way to improve this ability is to make students conscious of the process itself. According to Wenden (1998) a good method of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware on their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This self report is called introspective, and helps students to start making their own decisions towards their learning process.
We could notice through these learners’ attitudes that students seemed to reach certain grade of autonomy, and we can conclude that, since the teacher never asked students to develop those kinds of activities. Learners were able to recognize their weaknesses; then, they thought about solutions and started working on them by their own. Through the interviews, I asked students if they thought they had improved their autonomous learning after writing in their field diaries, and these were some of the answers:

_Evelyn:_ Definitivamente sí, porque como te repito, hay cosas que uno en la clase aprende fácilmente, sin embargo cuando uno no está en clase se le olvidan y uno no presta atención de ello, en cambio cuando voy a escribir en mi diario y tengo que acordarme, eso me ayuda.

_Alex:_ Sí, mejoro en que ya no necesito que me estén diciendo vea repase esto, haga esto, estudie esto, busque esto si no que yo voy buscando lo que creo que necesito para superar todo los objetivos, más que todo en esto.

_George:_ uy bastante, si mejoro mi autonomía porque imagínese que yo hasta hice un cursito chiquito, de esos cursos gratis, por el interés que me nació más.

Learners not only demonstrate some autonomy attitudes in their field diaries, but also most of them agreed during the interview that they were conscious of that autonomy increase. Evelyn expresses for example how the field diary helped her to remember and study by herself those things about the class that she had forgotten. Alex and George corroborate they became more autonomous arguing that now, they do not need to be pushed by the teacher in order to study and are able to find new ways to study by their own.

Moreover, field diaries helped students to raise awareness of their learning process. They are one means of organizing regular practices and help learners self-monitor and self-reflect on their learning process. Learner autonomy according to Holec (1981) is the ability to organize their resources autonomously in their own learning. By organizing their resources (learning strategies and styles), students reach a goal that allow them to become aware of their competences and all the alternatives to achieve them. Guided field diaries can help students to emphasize the importance of rather simply writing than provoke deeper reflection and provide opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arrives from their experiences. A conscious reflection is a
good start to autonomous learning. As Benson (2001, p. 207) points out, reflections upon positive feelings can confirm the learner’s sense of the rightness of a plan.

In this finding I realized that students were strong in terms of self-initiative and making plans. Here I also found that they were rich at reflecting on the content of their learning and in their learning process. For example, they made plans for them to study and knew how to efficiently make use of their time for English study. Finally, students were capable at changing their learning methods, regulating their learning materials based on their needs, and were skilled at creating a good study environment for themselves.

To conclude, findings from this research project showed some sequential steps before reaching autonomy. Throughout writing their field diaries, learners started to become aware of certain factors of their learning process such as weaknesses, styles and feelings. This first step let students know about all the process they were involved in during the English course. Then, it seems to be a direct relation among awareness, responsibility and motivation. After learners became more aware of all the factors mentioned before, they described to be more motivated and therefore, they showed some responsible attitudes towards their learning process.
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper, based on students’ reflection expressed on their self reflection diaries during the English classes, describes some of the changes that took place in their attitudes towards learning and the benefits of writing a self reflection diary. The results of students’ evaluations indicate that self reflection diaries help students reflect upon their learning experience and achievement, functioning as an instrument for self-initiative, self-awareness, and self-evaluation (Matsumoto, 1996).

Other pedagogical implications of this experience are related to the transformations that were observed by the students themselves in their attitudes and perceptions towards writing a self reflection diary. They suggested that the answers to the self reflection diaries’ questions should not only be expressed on the paper like sentences or paragraphs, but also be shared with the rest of the classroom in order to find common troubles and looking for possible solutions to them.
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Future research would benefit by being focused to a smaller scale with narrower variety of participants. In addition, because of the existence of individual differences, it is important to remember that self reflection diaries are not the only way to encourage students’ autonomy. Portfolios, questionnaires, journals and other projects which allow students to produce a variety of text-types and give students greater freedom should also be considered.

It would be also important to consider implementing not only questions that guide the students to think in their learning process, but also that invite them to reflect more on their personal objectives, that is, working deeper on their intrinsic motivation.
CONCLUSIONS

After conducting this research study I can state some conclusions based on the research questions that guide this investigation. The first one was: What is the impact of self reflection diaries to promote autonomous learning? Self-reflection diaries allow students free choice; the participants of my research had the opportunity to express their beliefs, interests and experiences in and outside the classroom. Students describe some of the changes that took place in the attitudes about learning and their views of the benefits of these diaries.

The second question was: What are students’ reflections toward the implementation of self reflection diaries? Throughout the development of the diaries students experienced the self awareness of their weaknesses and strengths, their learner process and feelings during the classes, the development of their competences when they were exposed to different tasks and the impact of the class topics in their personal lives. Besides, the reflective diaries were kind of a dialoged and students viewed them as a means of communication or bridges of interaction between them and the teacher. During this process students experienced the field diaries as a way to process writing, and at the same time as a tool for learning in context.

Finally, answering to the third question: What are the students’ perceptions about the influence of their self reflection diaries in their own autonomous learning process? Self reflection diaries constitute a bridge resource to identify traits of identity construction. The results of students’ opinions indicate that daily diaries help them reflect upon their learning experience and achievement, functioning as an instrument for self-initiative, self-awareness and self-evaluation.
The accounts of the students’ writings reveled that all of them construct identity based on what interest them, increasing their consciousness of responsibility facing the subject. Students were able to recognize their weaknesses and strengths, looking for the better way to overcome them, by being aware of what strategies were the best for them. In addition, because of the existence of individual differences, it is important to remember that self reflection diaries are not the only way to encourage students’ autonomy. Portfolios and other projects which allow students to produce a variety of text-types and give students greater freedom should also be considered.
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APPENDIX
Self-reflection diaries’ questions

1) Como se sintió durante el desarrollo de la clase?
2) Que es lo que más se le dificulta en las clases de Ingles?
3) Cual es lo que has sido sus fortalezas y debilidades hasta el momento? por qué?
4) Ha hecho algo para mejorar su situación?
5) Piensa en como ha sido tu proceso hasta el momento, y describe las situaciones que creas han sido mas relevantes para tu aprendizaje del Ingles.
6) Cuantas veces has tenido contacto con el Ingles fuera de clase? como han sido esos momentos?
7) Como te sientes frente al hecho de aprender lengua extranjera, en este caso Ingles?
8) Como crees que esos sentimientos puedan afectar tu proceso de aprendizaje?
9) En que parte de la clase se ha sentido mejor? por que cree?
10) En que momentos de la clase no se ha sentido bien? por qué?
Sample of a Field Diary

NOTE: The following field diary is a sample taken from one basic ILEX student. She was one of five students who wrote a field diary as a pilot for my project. I decided to take this field diary as a sample since it was the most descriptive, and it gives very important information about her learning process.

Hubo un inconveniente y es que no tengo facilidad para pronunciar bien y esto lo note cuando tuve que hacer preguntas para entregar la tarjeta de identidad a uno de los compañeros.

El viernes 29 encontré una página web en donde puedo repetir una palabra en inglés y luego se puede meter dicha palabra en una frase corta, esto va desde un grado simple hasta un grado más difícil. Yo solo hice el primer grado y el segundo grado de cada palabra. Busque también la letra de la canción “Sacrifice” de Elton Jhon y trate de pronunciarla pues mi dificultad es la pronunciación.

Yo me siento muy motivada y estoy perdiendo la pereza que siempre tuve al inglés pues nunca vi en mi un progreso en este idioma.

Las clases son amenas y variadas y se requiere de mucha participación. Yo no me siento frustrada ni entre los peores, pues logro comprender el sentido de una frase y deducir el resto de las palabras.

Hoy pase a limpio mis notas de clase y me doy cuenta que memorizo mejor el vocabulario y las frases. Para la tarea de la descripción de la pieza de la casa escogí la cocina pero tuve que buscar en el diccionario de francés – inglés porque no conozco mucho el vocabulario. Yo sigo muy motivada, porque voy notando mi progreso.

Estoy un poco triste porque no recogieron la tarea. Me doy cuenta que memorizo muy bien las frases y que voy adquiriendo mucho vocabulario pero en el momento de
hablar. “todo seme traba y no sé ni que contestar. Me va a tocar comprar un cuadernito para meter solamente las “famosas frases”.

Como siempre, las clases me motivan mucho pues poco a poco voy dándome cuenta que el Ingles no es imposible para mí. Además encontré un nuevo site de internet para aprender a pronunciar cada día.

08 – 09 – 2008

Ya compre el cuaderno y voy a escribir las frases que voy estudiando “tengo que memorizarlas"

12-09-2008

Prepare el “Family tree” pero no puedo grvarlo en USB, se me extravió. Anote una a una las frases en el cuaderno pero no logro memorizar la pronunciación. Yo sigo con mucha motivación y me implico mucho pero “mula en pronunciar”. Hice en una hoja la presentación de mi esposo.

13-09-2008

La clase como hasta ahora estuvo muy interesante, hemos avanzado mucho, claro que tuve la impresión de que Katherine iba un poco rápido.
Sample of Interviews

S3 Alejandro:

*Que piensas acerca de la actividad de escribir un diario de clase?*

IQ1S3: La actividad de escribir en el diario es agradable, es importante ya que allí expresamos las dificultades, las ventajas que tenemos, además es un medio en el cual tenemos una medida que nos va diciendo que tenemos que ir haciendo, qué está pasando, que tenemos que aprender, en que andamos mal ya que nosotros mismos lo escribimos, lo planteamos entonces conocemos más las debilidades.

*Cuales crees que son las ventajas de tener un diario de campo?*

IQ2S3: Ventajas, pues ventajas hay varias, pero la que más se exclama ahí, la que más se me viene a la mente es que siempre vamos a tener las ventajas y todas esas cosas que escribimos en mente, y por lo menos las vamos a tener ahí para estarnos exigiendo que necesitamos.

*Crees que el diario te ayudo a saber cuáles son tus fortalezas y debilidades en tu proceso de aprendizaje?*

IQ3S3: Además que las escribíamos fuimos descubriendo más, por lo menos yo descubrí más debilidades.

*Después de identificar los aspectos positivos y negativos, crees que el diario te ayuda o impulsa a seguir trabajando en el proceso?*

IQ4S3: al identificar las debilidades y al saber que tengo aspectos positivos, esto me da más motivos para yo seguir exigiéndome y adquiriendo más conocimiento.

*y en los aspectos negativos?*

si claro, como todo, igual so mis debilidades, se supone que las debo superar y con esto yo ya planteo que es lo que necesito.
IQ5S3: El hecho de obligarte a escribir lo que piensas, crees que es una forma de motivarte a pensar en tu proceso de aprendizaje?

Sí, porque es otra manera en que el docente también le exige a uno y en el cual no damos de alguna manera cuenta de las fallas que podamos tener.

IQ6S3: Crees que después de escribir en tu diario, tu proceso de autonomía mejoro, o fue motivado por el diario?

Sí, mejoró en que ya no necesito que me estén diciendo vea repase esto, haga esto, estudie esto, busque esto si no que yo voy buscando lo que creo que necesito para superar todo los objetivos, más que todo en esto.

S1 Sebastián

Que piensas acerca de la actividad de escribir un diario de clase?

IQ1S1: Pues me parece bien, porque ahí lo pueden estar evaluando a uno, como se siente en las clases, en la materia, como avance.

Tú crees entonces que es una forma del profesor evaluar el proceso del estudiante al estudiante?

Sí, yo creo que sí.

Cuales crees que son las ventajas de tener un diario de campo?

IQ2S1: Pues porque puede el profesor mirar a ver qué dificultades tienen los estudiantes para mejorarlas o para ver qué actividades hace.

Y qué ventajas tendría para estudiante?

Pues para el estudiante no sé, casi lo mismo, pues porque así el profesor mejora y le propone a uno actividades para uno mejorar sus dificultades.
Crees que el diario te ayudo a saber cuáles son tus fortalezas y debilidades en tu proceso de aprendizaje?

IQ3S1: Pues sí, identifique que tenía problemas en pronunciación y escritura, cosas así.

El hecho de obligarte a escribir lo que piensas, crees que es una forma de motivarte a pensar en tu proceso de aprendizaje?

IQ5S1: Pues si también, porque ahí tiene uno que mirar a ver….. Pues mirar que uno tiene que mejorar y mirar en que aspectos está fallando uno para mejorarlos.

Tú me dijiste que tenías problemas de pronunciación, después de darte cuenta de esto, hiciste algo para mejorar tu situación? si es así, crees que el diario te impulso a hacerlo?

IPQS1: Pues yo sí lo escribí, pero si uno no los mejora es por pereza, de vagancia porque no los mejora pero uno se da cuenta porque uno sigue en las mismas.

Tú crees que el diario no fue de ayuda? crees que vale la pena?

Pues sí, yo no sé, yo creo. Pues para el que le ponga interés y atención sirve.