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## Reflections about the

Relationship between Technology and Autonomy in English Language Learning and Teaching during pandemic COVID-19 at the Noncommissioned Officer Academy Sargento Inocencio Chincá – EMSUB

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## Abstract

This paper settles down a reflective discussion about the relationship between technology and autonomy in English language learning and teaching at the Noncommissioned Officers Academy Sergeant Inocencio Chincá-EMSUB. These reflections are based on the concept that autonomy must not be just seen under the learner-centered viewpoint, but also the teacher's perspective on autonomy and the most meaningful the Teacher-Learner interrelations, which engage learners for lifelong learning. The role of technology has become a central issue in the triad teacher-learner-environment autonomy due to its contributions to language teaching. The unique and particular demands at EMSUB classrooms commit teachers to stimulating their autonomy to promote learners' own. Unlike the idea of an isolated learner, the impact of the technology in teaching involves subjective aspects that have influenced the learner's autonomy based on the role of the teachers, and the relationship between them, under the thought of learner's sense of teacher's presence; but also, the construction of autonomous environments which foster learner's internal dialogue with their language teacher long after the language learning class has ended.

## Key words

Learner training and strategies, teacher autonomy, language advising, social technologies for learning.

## Introduction

Technology provides teachers and learners with digital materials, tools, and the possibilities to enhance online collaboration and communication. The purpose of this article is to present a reflection about the relationship between technology and autonomy in English language learning and teaching at The Noncommissioned Officer Academy Sargent Inocencio Chincá – EMSUB (The acronym in Spanish). This thought focuses on the experiences L2 learners at EMSUB have been facing to develop their language proficiency using digital tools, which have made them concerned about their responsibility in their learning process. Furthermore, this article reflects how teachers have been motivated to study and work on how new technology-mediated language teaching environments could take part in daily teaching and how they chose to respond to the more autonomous settings. What is more, this paper considers teacher autonomy at EMSUB to assess and adapt the syllabus according to the needs of the context as well as how technology supported the formal assessment process trying to stand behind the relationship between educational objectives, the assessment design, and the learning outcomes in terms of reliability and validity.

How do teachers at EMSUB think technology can support the creation of autonomous learning

environments in English language teaching? Since computers became commercial, the world wide web appeared, and the removable, rewritable data storage small devices jumped into the market, the technology has been playing an innovative role in education, that has moved teachers to new perspectives and to come into different knowledge which demands the acquisition of new abilities to implement and impact on students' choices and self-directedness (Kim, 2014). For the majority of the teachers, learner autonomy has been one of the most meaningful topics that involve their pedagogical proposals in classrooms. Talking about learners' autonomy to learn English must consider all the elements in this set: teachers, learners, curriculum, and assessment (D. G. Little et al., 2003), as well as how they interact to show students the pathways to their learning awareness-raising. It should be noticed that creating an autonomous learning environment must be appraised as Flavell (1979) proposes "the thinking about your own thinking"; Flavell states that the metacognitive process implies that learners think intentionally, consciously, purposefully, foresighted, and directed at accomplishing an outcome (Flavell, 1979). To Provide an environment that invites the learner to bear on an active monitoring, consequent regulation, and development of these processes concerning the cognitive objects, data, or abilities related to reaching a concrete goal. To put it another way, the learners have got a great responsibility in their learning process.

Nowadays, understanding how technology transforms the teacher and learner's role in the classroom and outside, the appropriateness of the curriculum, and the assessment process is significant for the teaching and learning process. Likewise, the influence of technology on the teaching and learning process has evolved since its first relation to education with Language Learning and Technology (LLT) and Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL). Hayo Reinders & Cynthia White (2016) looked specifically at five themes related to autonomy research and technology: learner training and strategies, teacher autonomy, self-access and language advising, telecollaboration, and social technologies for learning, to address how to shape our understanding of both autonomy and technology, and the relationship between them. According to them, metacognitive strategies play a valuable role in learner training because the students have lots of opportunities to access knowledge when they want, how they want to, but without guidance, with the risk that the outcome assigned could not be achieved. So, the technology for language learning beyond formal study has become one research approach related to learner roles and technology-enhanced language learning (Reinders & White, 2016).

Since the concept of teacher autonomy compiled by Lamb & Reinders (2008) appeared in the educational context, day to day, teachers are thinking, designing, and developing appropriate

learning opportunities, which include digital tools, to foster students to raise language learning self-awareness (Lamb & Reinders, 2008). But to do so, teachers support all their strategies on the curriculum and assessment. Digital learning material, resources, and Learning Management systems (LMS) have made syllabus and evaluation more flexible, allowing the teacher to manage the piece of teaching and assessment to adapt the material to be meaningful for students according to their educational context..

### **The portrayal of Learners, Teachers, And Their Context**

The Noncommissioned Officer Academy Sargent Inocencio Chincá – EMSUB (the acronym in Spanish) is a military training academy and a higher education institution for technological level with the purpose of teaching and training youths who want to belong to the National Army by offering the military-academic program in Military Training and Management (TEM, the acronym in Spanish), and other academic programs as complementary support to students' academics background in response to the National Army's demands. The EMSUB is an organic unit of the university institution of the Education and Doctrine Commando (CEDOC, the acronym in Spanish) that likewise is owned by the general organization of the National Defense Ministry. The academic programs offered are aligned to the National Education Ministry regulations, as well as the institutional educative culture frame of the Educational Project of the Military Forces of Colombia (PEFA, the acronym in Spanish), the guidelines of the Educational System of the Military Forces of Colombia (SEFA the acronym in Spanish), the Strategic Plan of the Educational System (PESE, the acronym in Spanish), the Institutional Educational Project (PEI, the acronym in Spanish) of the National Army and current regulations.

In addition to the Colombian military army philosophy, at EMSUB, education is understood as a continuing process, where the learner rules critically the knowledge, competencies, attitudes, and skills required to get a better understanding of the current context, to value, and give meaning to the military circumstances. According to the Academic and Discipline Regulations, a student at EMSUB is conceived as a person who acts based on principles, ethical thoughts, character, and total obedience to the rules; a leader with high communicative skills, a strong comprehension of the surroundings, which has to face, keen on learning, upgrading and innovating in his military and humanistic education. An EMSUB alumni study simultaneously two technological programs, the mean academic program in Military Training and Management (TEM); and a complimentary technological program. On day to day, an EMSUB student carries out military and academic tasks organized on a schedule, where it is set a time for autonomous work, which starts very early in the morning and finishes late in the evening.

Moreover, it is relevant to mention that the PEI of the National Army of Colombia is not only established the significant bases of the pedagogical model to be followed but also allows each military educational academy to define their pedagogical model according to their mission and context; which focuses on considering the Teacher as a mediator to promote the development of multiple intelligences by asking the Teacher more than his professional abilities and knowledge of concepts related to the subject to be taught; it means the Teacher must have the ability to read students' needs and strengths (for example Colombian diversity is sat in a classroom) to set them as a tool into a meaningful context throughout pedagogical strategies based on teacher autonomy.

Because of the conception of an EMSUB student, the Foreign Languages Department focuses on promoting the use of the language by making students thrive in the abilities of the language. At EMSUB, the students' population is about 2200 people in the first, second and third military levels, organized in classrooms of 50 students approximately. It is disposed to work with this population a team of 6 English language teachers. At being introduced to this background, there is a good impression to be part of this challenging purpose taking into account the heterogeneity in most of the groups in terms of language abilities which shows the lack of meaningful educational policies in public education and the enormous difference among rural and urban public schools.

### **Autonomy and Technology: English Language Teacher Autonomy at EMSUB**

In recent years, foreign language teachers have been facing the challenge of putting the principles of autonomous learning into practice by providing the learner with access to resources mediated by technology. Facing this field, it is necessary to talk about teacher autonomy. This chapter presents some of the most relevant, and contemporary approaches and discussions about teacher autonomy. Moreover, it discusses some considerations and issues related to this topic and the role of technology for Language teachers at EMSUB. To begin with, it is considered different scholars who provided the basis for defining the concept of teacher autonomy in applied linguistics. At revising the literature on teacher autonomy, mostly publications in their basis have in common to mention David Little (1995), who argued that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent. He stated that the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy. Little (1995) sat down that 'genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the regard of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers' (D. Little, 1995).

In addition, reflecting on the impact teacher autonomy has on their teaching environment, the following approaches to teacher autonomy show the scope of what teachers may, potentially, do and become through their work. For example, McGrath (2000) argued that teacher autonomy goes beyond an evaluative stance toward the contextual factors that teachers can control. He emphasized the teacher autonomy in self-directed professional development, and freedom from constraints originating inside or outside the educational institutions (McGrath, 2000). McGrath encourages teachers to think about the position of the teacher at the center of their development. He argued that in the language teaching field, the teacher might be a researcher. Another substantial approach in this reflection is the relevance of teacher-learner autonomy that Smith (2008) stated. Smith stood on the definition of teacher autonomy in sets of dimensions firstly related to professional action: 'self-directed professional action, capacity for such professional action, and freedom from control over professional action, and secondly related to professional development: self-directed professional development, capacity for self-directed professional development, and freedom from control over self-directed professional development (Smith & Endorğan, 2008).

In 2008 Lamb and Reinders, in the first volume of the Applied linguistic series, gathering different publications about autonomy in language learning, based on that work, they also stated a definition for Teacher autonomy defining it as the ability a teacher has to improve his teaching through his efforts (Lamb & Reinders, 2008).

Referring to the views of teacher autonomy our reflection is based on, how do teachers at EMSUB think technology can support the creation of autonomous learning environments in English language teaching? The answer to this inquiry depends, then, on the teacher's knowledge of autonomy and his/her ability to implement it into the syllabus; either with or without the use of self-access facilities to complement classroom teaching to face the particular demands that the teaching-learning process carries out for learners at EMSUB. By the same token, teachers' steady sense of personal responsibility for their teaching and persevering self-examinations about his/her teaching role is one of the pillars for autonomous learning environments in language teaching. The answer to this question is an open and meaningful encouragement to revise teachers' cognitive, creative, and dynamic control of the teaching process.

As it was stated in the previous chapter, the teachers' portrayal in the PEI of the National Army, responds to Minerva Plan goals which are focused on transforming and strengthening the education and doctrine military system. With this in mind, belonging to the teacher team entails not only the responsibility focused simply on the language teaching process but also on the upper goal, which

engages with government policies that impact the purpose of the Army to be globalized. Regarding the previous setting, the language teachers' autonomy might not be understood as a limited field of action. On the contrary, teachers are moved to up to date mindset and to come into different knowledge to face the diversity sat in a classroom, and use that as a tool into meaningful pedagogical contexts, demanding the acquisition of new abilities to implement and impact on students' choices and self-directedness, (Kim, 2014).

The understanding of language learning and teaching has been transforming as a result of the power of technology to be enabling a shift of focus away from the classroom and of conventional language teaching-learning methodologies. Similarly, throughout this decade the impact of technology in day-to-day pedagogical practices has changed the role of teachers and learners, and just like the impact on their perspective on autonomy in their language teaching-learning process. Language teachers not only must have a high proficiency language and strong teaching competencies but also knowledge and digital competencies, which can enrich their teaching language environments. With this in mind, the strong connection between the development of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy can be visualized thanks to the role of technology, this issue has strongly sat down that teaching is not only considered as a process to teach content to develop competencies but also it involves other subjective aspects that learners notice and transfer to themselves motivated by their empathy to teacher autonomy on his/her learning about the use of digital tools in his/her classes and implementation of those tools in their practice, giving an engaging social meaning to the learning environment.

At including technology resources in language teaching, Reinders (2008) defined the concept of language advising as "a type of language support where teachers meet with students on an individual basis to offer advice and feedback and to help students develop self-directed learning skills"(Reinders, 2008). In light of Reinders' conceptualization, language advising guides learners in their learning experiences. Reinders and White (2016), in their study 20 YEARS OF AUTONOMY AND TECHNOLOGY: HOW FAR HAVE WE COME AND WHERE TO NEXT, invite teachers to think that the type of language support given has been impacted by communication technology (Reinders & White, 2016). The teacher has a wide variety of forms of communication to choose from according to the nature of the task and the feedback purposes allowing teachers to approach alternative pedagogies. Based on the previous state, the online access for learners to those multiples forms or communication is regulated by the teacher throughout the teaching aims he/she settles to that particular learning context as well as the language advice it could need to accomplish the outcome.

Provided that, it moves teachers to consider that learning mediated by technology enables learners to learn collaboratively.

Knowledge is a collective construction; when teachers decide to take into account digital tools in their teaching, collaborative learning is taking in mind this premise. The teacher's role in building learner autonomy is crucial. When reading about that, many scholars in common cite Little and Brammerts (1996) who remarked that taking into account learning is an interactive process, learner autonomy is a collaborative matter; teachers must design a learning environment that exposes learners to support each other and learn from one another. In the view of the transition from dependence on the teacher to wholly independent task performance, technological and pedagogical inspiration is important to design tasks that would, in turn, foster their learners' competence and autonomy, through online collaborative experiences.

It is well known; technology has gained a strong position these days on language teaching because of its contributions to the interactive process of teaching-learning, and teacher autonomy. At EMSUB, the language teachers are moved to be reflective on how effective are their teaching strategies' and other academic supporting issues related to the mission of the Language Department. EMSUB language teachers' efforts are focused on trying to be pedagogically creative to bring learners learning opportunities to work in autonomous environments supported by digital resources and a learning management system platform. Taking into account how complex is the military-academic context teachers' teamwork is crucial. Individual teachers' perspectives on autonomy enrich the pedagogical environment in the classroom and the discussion, analysis, and adaptation of the syllabus by conjugating the institutional dispositions, the complexity of context, and the most important in EMSUB language teachers' mind the learners' needs.

### **Autonomy and Technology: Learner Autonomy at EMSUB**

For decades, one of the most popular approaches in learner autonomy researches is as a radically learner-centered idea. This paper does not focus its reflections on that view. To build up a practical language learning setting, every teaching methodology to create autonomous environments must be discussed, designed, and applied to conduct learners to build up a skillset that lets them direct their learning. Although most learners do not naturally have those skills, they require explicit guidance to develop them. So, to talk about autonomy is not exclusive for learners, as it is stated in the previous chapter, teacher autonomy is a foremost concern in the triad environment-learner-teacher autonomy.

To support the perspective of this chapter about

learner autonomy, citing Benson's language learning autonomy concept is relevant. Benson (2001) argued that the conception of personal autonomy, based on the perception that individuals strive both for their autonomy and the autonomy of others, is the cornerstone of autonomy in learning for the binomial teacher-learner autonomy (Benson, 2001). Benson (2008) suggested that learners' perspective on autonomy learning should be focused on what learners can do to help themselves move towards the goal of personal autonomy supported by teacher guidance focused on the development of the internal capacity for autonomy at the expense of external freedom in the language learning process (Benson, 2008). In other words, learners must be exposed to language learning environments enriching on social, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies that enable learners to manage their learning by developing skills for lifelong.

In addition, La Ganza (2008) settled down that learner autonomy in language learning is a teacher-learner interrelational construct. Indeed, La Ganza (2008) explained that learner autonomy depends upon the capacity of the teacher and the learner to develop and maintain an interrelational climate characterized by the teacher's holding back from influencing the learner, and the learner holding back from seeking the teacher's influence (La Ganza, 2008). Paraphrasing La Ganza's premise, learner autonomy grows into a meaningful capacity of the learner only as the learner and the teacher interrelate; in other words, the learner's educative well-being is the most significant issue in the teacher's mind.

Technology has facilitated a more interactive teaching-learning experience. Also, communications technology has made online access easier for learners and enabled multiple forms of communication, so students can make decisions about their learning beyond teacher guidance by forming learning networks to support each other, where learners can interact, share experiences, resources, and help. Social technology for language learning at EMSUB has focused on those extra learning environments learners pursue their learning, the role of others and their efforts, and the manner they work with and restructure issues of their language learning environment to settle down some optimal learning conditions according to their particular needs outside the classroom.

Reflecting upon autonomous environments for language learning at EMSUB, there is a strength that teachers must take advantage of, which is to have into learners' classes schedule a time called autonomous work. By bringing learners with effective tools to keep learning outside the formal setting of the classes, language teachers could assume that the methodology efforts, focused on teaching autonomy, allow learners to be more empowered, not only to accomplish a formal language learning goal establish on the syllabus

but also to keep studying in other informal contexts, to improve their language proficiency.

## Conclusion

Throughout the chapters, this article focuses its reflections on a not learner-centered concept of autonomy. As it was stated previously, the teachers' role in learner autonomy is more than important. The teacher's perception of autonomy and his autonomy itself is considered a keystone in teaching-learning autonomy, not only for being updated on how to include technology in their teaching methodologies but also to transfer their perception on autonomy to connect students meaningfully. The context of those days' invites teachers to use their autonomy to acquire technological abilities and skills. Since pandemic, EMSUB Language English teachers have been working hard on establishing strategies under the premise of autonomous learning by designing language activities where students' accomplishment of the outcomes is mediated by telecollaboration, social media technology, and positive and powerful teacher-learner interaction language advice.

Despite the current health emergency by Covid-19, which has moved humanity to think and be creative, to give solutions to keep a kind of "normality" in day-to-day lives, for educators this time has been accepted as an opportunity for reengineering teaching practices. EMSUB language teachers have been mobilized either to reengineer teaching methodologies supported by technology. EMSUB language teacher autonomy has been essential for this reengineering proposal, day-to-day teachers have been gaining expertise in the use of a Learning Management System, videos communication programs and apps, Web-based applications in which documents and spreadsheets can be created, edited, and stored online for collaborative tasks, and others web 2.0 tools, under the thought of learner's sense of teacher's presence. The experience provided by the online interactions allowed teachers to foster learner autonomy not by the thought of being having classes "alone" but the learning experiences facilitated with the teacher-learner relationship, with the premise of teacher's and learners' restraint and concern of their educative well-being. It is hoped that this approach of teaching language at EMSUB consolidates the construction of autonomous environments which engages learners' internal dialogue with their language teacher long after the learning experience has ended (La Ganza, 2008).

To sum up, we cannot deny the tremendous impact technology has in most contexts of people's life. The ways technology takes part in setting an autonomous learning environment in language teaching, mobilizing the thinking to stare at the teaching and learning formal and informal context teachers and learners belong to, and how it can be transformed through the evolution of their roles. That is to say, the pandemic taught that

teachers are always invited to explore digital tools that allow them to personalize their teaching according to their learners' needs based on their educational context. Moreover, teachers should add to their roles how to stimulate and sustain a positive relationship between technology and autonomy in both formal and informal learning contexts to foster learners to be committed to their learning process by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. As well, all the elements in the syllabus should be thought for not only formal but also informal teaching-learning process, formalizing and joining consciously teachers' strategies to learners' responsibilities. As previously stated, the synergy that keeps together working technology and autonomy at teaching-learning English is the perception and the position of digital tools concerning language learning as a result of autonomy learning.

Finally, this article has been considered the beginning of future deeper reflections in the field of learner autonomy, autonomous environments based on tools technology brings to teachers, focused on language teaching strategies in the military-academic context.

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